



From *The Harder They Come* to *Yardie*

Emiel Martens

To cite this article: Emiel Martens (2020) From *The Harder They Come* to *Yardie*, Interventions, 22:1, 71-92, DOI: [10.1080/1369801X.2019.1659160](https://doi.org/10.1080/1369801X.2019.1659160)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/1369801X.2019.1659160>



© 2019 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group



Published online: 23 Sep 2019.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 370



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)

FROM THE HARDER THEY COME TO YARDIE

The Reggae-Ghetto Aesthetics of the Jamaican Urban Crime Film

Emiel Martens^{a,b}

^aDepartment of Arts and Culture Studies, Erasmus University Rotterdam, Netherlands; ^bDepartment of Media Studies, University of Amsterdam, Netherlands

.....
black cinema
ghetto aesthetics
Kingston
Jamaica
reggae aesthetics
urban crime film

*In this essay I explore the Jamaican and Jamaican diasporic urban crime films that have appeared over the past fifty years. In these films, downtown Kingston, the impoverished inner-city of Jamaica's capital, has been commonly portrayed as an ambivalent crime-ridden-but-music-driven space, violent yet vibrant. First, I place these Jamaican ghetto films in the context of the wider tradition of the black urban crime film that appeared in parallel with the liberation movements in Latin America and Africa from the 1950s and developed in dialectic with black city cinema and accented cinema in North America and Europe from the 1970s. Then, I present the history of the Jamaican urban crime film in two parts. The first part contains a discussion of the development of the genre from the 1970s until the 1990s, starting with *The Harder They Come* (1972) and some immediate successors and ending with *Dancehall Queen* (1997) and *Third World Cop* (1999), the two most successful Jamaican films to date. In the second part, I discuss the low-budget "gangsta" films made by Jamaican*

American filmmakers since the 2000s, as well as the bigger-budget (trans)national productions that were either partially or completely set in Kingston throughout the 2010s, with Yardie (2018) as most recent example. Taking into account the production and reception of these films, I will use the concept of reggae-ghetto aesthetics to characterize the portrayal of downtown Kingston in Jamaican city cinema.

Introduction

Ever since the success of Perry Henzell's *The Harder They Come* (1972, *THTC*), "Jamaica's first feature film", starring Jimmy Cliff as "a country boy who comes to Kingston" to find fame as both a reggae singer and ghetto gangster (*Jamaica Gleaner* [JG], October 1, 1972), the black urban crime film has been the foremost genre among Jamaican and Jamaican diasporic filmmakers. Throughout the nearly fifty-year history of Jamaican urban crime films, downtown Kingston, the inner-city of Jamaica's capital, has been portrayed as an ambivalent crime-ridden-but-music-driven space, violent yet vibrant. As such, "Jamaican fictional cinema" (Moseley-Wood 2015, 31) has contributed to the emergence of "a new cinema of the Caribbean" (Hall 1989, 222) that seeks to confront the region's "usual misuse as exotic background to Euro-American romantic narratives and spectacles" (Cham 1992, 6). Depicting Jamaica as a poor urban society, the genre of the "ghetto crime film set in Kingston" (Kuhn and Westwell 2012, 239) has constructed a social-realist "film image" of the Caribbean that is "different from the reigning limited stereotypic 'islands of enchantment'" (Cham 1992, 6–7); an image that reveals the Caribbean experience beyond the sea, sand and sun of the imperialist "paradise discourse" (Strachan 2002, 3) disseminated by the mainstream media and tourism industries.

Indeed, throughout the years, Jamaican urban crime films have presented images of the island that, as one film critic noted about *Ghett'a Life* (2011), "tourists and most Jamaicans don't get to see" (*Itz Caribbean*, September 11, 2012).¹ While downtown Kingston "can seem off-limits" to visit for "middle-class Jamaicans and tourists alike" (*Caribbean Beat*, March/April 2017), Jamaica's "city films" (Moseley-Wood 2015, 29) can offer them accessible audiovisual glimpses of a world far away from their own, if not geographically, then socioeconomically and ethnoculturally. As with other black ghettos in both the global South and North, the appeal of "Kingston's so-called ghetto" (Howard 2005, 117) seems to lie in the exotic combination of poverty and criminality, on the one hand, and creativity and musicality, on the other. As Howard notes, downtown Kingston has been "the seedbed for a rich and vibrant music and arts

1 Or, as popular Jamaican reggae and dancehall artist Damian Marley, youngest son of reggae legend Bob Marley, put it in his 2005 hit single "Welcome to Jamrock", "some boy noy notice, them only come around like

tourist, on the beach
with a few club sodas
... and they don't
know the real
hardcore".

scene, which has gripped both Kingstonians and international audiences" (125). In recent decades, "cultural tours" to Kingston's inner-city have joined "the emerging worldwide trend of 'ghetto tourism'" (*JG*, October 9, 2017). Alternatively termed "slum tourism" (Dürr and Jaffe 2012) or "inequality tourism" (Osbourne 2018), this form of tourism draws on "both altruism and voyeurism", converting urban poverty and creativity into a commodity "premised on pre-existing national, class and racial inequalities" (Dürr and Jaffe 2012, 118).

Dürr and Jaffe (119) suggest that "the ghetto" is "both created and disseminated through globally circulated... representations". These representations "often reproduce clichéd images of the urban poor", but could also "provide openings for more nuanced, alternative" understandings of disenfranchized urban areas. Moseley-Wood (2015, 32) argues that reggae and dancehall (and the same could be said of urban poverty and crime) "have provided Jamaican filmmakers the means through which to communicate in familiar way[s] with local audiences about their experiences at home, as well as appeal to audiences abroad, in the diaspora and otherwise". Straddling the fine line between "postcolonial criticism" (Harrison 2003) and "ghetto voyeurism" (Duffett 2013), the genre of the "Jamaican gangster/crime film" has contributed to contrasting "articulations and mythologies" of downtown Kingston (Bakari 2018, 204) on the crossroads of the dystopian gangster and utopian musical film.

In this essay I will explore the Jamaican urban crime films that have appeared over the past fifty years. First, I will place these movies in the context of the wider tradition of the black urban crime film that appeared in parallel with the liberation movements in Latin America and Africa in the 1950s, and developed in dialectic with black city cinema (Massood 2003) and accented cinema (Naficy 2001) in North America and Europe from the 1970s. Then, based on archival newspaper and magazine research,² I will present the history of the Jamaican urban crime film in two parts. The first part will contain a discussion of the development of the genre from the 1970s until the 1990s, starting with *THTC* and some immediate "blaxploitation" successors and ending with *Dancehall Queen* (1997) and *Third World Cop* (1999), the two most successful Jamaican feature films to date. In the second part, I will review the low-budget "gangsta" films made by Jamaican American or "Jamerican" filmmakers since the 2000s,³ as well as the often bigger-budget, (trans)national productions that were either partially or completely set in downtown Kingston throughout the 2010s, with *Yardie* (2018) as most recent example. Taking into account the production and reception of these films, I will use the concept of reggae-ghetto aesthetics to characterize the portrayal of downtown Kingston in Jamaican city cinema.

2 Since newspaper reports of the *Jamaica Gleaner* are my primary source materials to interpret the history of the Jamaican urban crime film, I shall use the abbreviation *JG* when quoting or paraphrasing from these reports. When referring to other newspapers and magazines, I provide their full title.

3 The term "Jamerican", a

The tradition of the black urban crime film

conjunction of “Jamaican” and “American”, was first coined and made popular in the 1990s by the New York-based rap duo Born Jamaicans. They used the term to signify their Jamaican parenting and American birth and upbringing. The term nowadays colloquially refers to Americans of Jamaican descent, either born in the United States or in Jamaica.

Since the 2000s there seems to be an increasing interest from global audiences in urban crime films depicting the lives of ghetto youths in so-called Third World cities. In 2001 the Mexican film *Amores Perros* (2000), set in the violent streets of Mexico City, was nominated for an Oscar for Best Foreign Language Film and awarded at many international film festivals. Two years later, in 2003, the Brazilian film *City of God* (2002), set in Rio de Janeiro’s gang-ridden favelas, received four Oscar nominations and numerous awards at film festivals across the globe. Then, in 2005, the South African film *Tsotsi* (2004), set in Johannesburg’s gritty Soweto township, earned the Oscar for Best Foreign Language Film as well as a dozen other awards at film festivals globally. These three films could be seen as representative of a new wave of “fictional feature films ... about the urban poor in ... Third World countries” (Garland 2013, 187). However, the genre of the black urban crime film has existed much longer than the recent trend might suggest. Already in the 1950s and 1960s, in parallel with, and in support of, the liberation movements and independence struggles across Latin America, Africa and the rest of the colonial world, independent filmmakers from these territories produced films that reflected on the (post)colonial experience of “life in the urban Third World” (Hardoy and Satterthwaite 1989). According to Armes (1987, 89), the postcolonial mood of that period was “very apparent in the work of many of the film makers”, who were “participating in a collective movement of revolutionary change”. The “belief in the political function” of what became known as Third Cinema was “fundamental to all these film makers”, who adopted “typical subjects” such as “the struggle for national liberation”, “the workings of justice”, “corruption” and “underdevelopment” (89).

As Stam (2003, 32) has noted, the “aesthetics of hunger” and the “aesthetics of garbage” were among the “alternative aesthetics” that were employed by Third Cinema filmmakers to “revalorize, by inversion, what had formerly been seen as negative, especially within colonialist discourse”. These aesthetics shared “the jujitsu trait of turning strategic weakness into tactical strength”, deploying “the force of the dominant against domination” and its global patterns of exploitation (32). In other words, for Third Cinema filmmakers, “the garbage metaphor captured the sense of marginality, of being condemned to survive within scarcity, of being the dumping ground for transnational capitalism, of being obliged to recycle the materials of the dominant culture” (32). Arguably, the ghetto, with its iconic makeshift houses, corrugated fences and rubbish dumps, is the material and discursive environment of hunger and garbage *par excellence*. In various Third Cinema “ghetto films” (Williams 2017, 16), the urban slum has been used as a setting to denote the residential segregation, poor living conditions and

4 In 1950 the Mexican urban crime film *Los Olvidados* (1950), directed by Luis Buñuel, set in the slums of Mexico City and portraying the lives of young street urchins, allegedly became the first feature film that showed the postcolonial experience in the so-called urban Third World.

5 According to Shohat and Stam (1994, 103), “the dominant European/American form of cinema” exercised a “monopolistic control of film distribution and exhibition in much of Asia, Africa, and the Americas” since the early days. Hollywood films have dominated the screens across the colonial world from about the 1910s.

other socioeconomic inequalities experienced by large parts of the urban population in post-independent societies under the “new global regime” (Stam 2003, 32). In doing so, these ghetto aesthetics often served as a critique of this local environment and global regime of (the failure of) transnational capitalism and international development.⁴ In many “ghetto youth films” (Olson 2017, 138) the “masculine-but-ethnocentric character of the gangster” came to embody this critique through “agentic, empowered personal action” (Wawrejko 2012). Although “the celluloid gangster” has been viewed as “a depoliticised response to social inequality” (a criminal who is joining-not-beating the system), “Third World decoding[s] of the gangster film” often made “explicit the anti-capitalist critique which remains implicit within most gangster films” (Wayne 2001, 84–85).

Of course, the genre of the black urban crime film did not develop in isolation from North America and Europe. Particularly, Hollywood films have dictated “the way of thinking of filmmakers and the audience” across the world (Ibbi 2014, 94), with “films of other countries” often being “remakes of Hollywood films, rewritten to adjust to local culture” (Rodman 2012, 159).⁵ The beginnings of the genre of the black urban crime film can be derived from African American film production in the 1930s and 1940s. According to Massood (2003, 46), during this period film producers “geared towards an African American market changed their theme and focus in order to compete with Hollywood”, adopting “popular genres like the gangster film” and using “African American city spaces” for the first time as “cinematic tropes”. Massood considers this latter stage of race film production as the period in which what she calls “black city cinema” came to light: “Sound-era race films addressed, for the first time, the presence and the promise of the city ... in contemporary black culture” (3). Massood largely defines black city cinema as the production of African American feature films exploring “contemporary African American urban life” during the second half of the twentieth century (2). The narratives of these films take place in specific urban settings, that is, “African American city spaces” (2), and usually deal with black (male) characters facing “poverty, unemployment, governmental abandonment, and the increasing presence of drugs and crime” (85). As Massood suggests, these settings do not function as “just mise-en-scène” but play “a central role like any other character” (85–86).

According to Massood (1), the “two most common genres” within American black city cinema have been the blaxploitation films from the 1970s, such as *Sweet Sweetback’s Baadasssss Song* (1971), *Shaft* (1971) and *Super Fly* (1972), and the hood films from the 1990s, such as *Boyz n the Hood* (1991), *New Jack City* (1991) and *Menace II Society* (1993). Both genres were defined by an “urban visual and aural iconography” (1) which conveyed the “look and sound” of “the African American urban scene” (85). As such, blaxploitation and hood films could be considered as a fusion of two,

seemingly contradictory, Hollywood genres: the gangster film and the musical. On the one hand, most blaxploitation and hood films revolved around violently aggressive black males “playing out various action-adventures in the ghetto” (Guerrero 1993, 67), usually involving street crime such as gun violence and drug offending. Neale (2000, 81) considers blaxploitation and hood films as “two waves of black gangster films” that indicate “the extent to which the gangster film has centred since the 1920s in particular on ethnic outsiders” in twentieth-century American society. As gangster films with black “crime-action-ghetto” narratives (81), both blaxploitation and hood films represented the African American urban experience of economic and racial oppression. This was usually done through the eyes of a criminally deviant male (anti-)hero moving in the dystopian environment of poor black inner-city neighbourhoods along America’s East and West Coast, which was constructed as “a swath of human and architectural devastation” (Forman 2002, 254).

On the other hand, most films from the two genres focussed heavily on “African American urban-based popular culture” (Massood 2003, 2). As such, they alluded to the genre of the musical. Although they were usually not musicals in the sense that characters burst into singing and dancing, they often incorporated “the music, clothing, speech idioms and personalities from their respective cultural contexts” (146). Both blaxploitation and hood films often featured prominent soundtracks made up of black urban music. While most blaxploitation films contained funk and soul soundtracks, hood films was closely associated with hip-hop and gangsta rap. According to music journalist David Ma (*Guardian*, May 26, 2017), in many blaxploitation films the soundtrack itself was “a character device”. Similarly, hood movies have often been described as “hiphop-inflected ghetto movies” (Jaffe 2012, 680). In fact, Forman (2002, 255) explains that the rise of gangsta rap spawned the rise of hood films. He talks about a “coemergence of gangsta rap and ‘hood films’” and a “reciprocal influence between rap and the ‘hood film’” (264–265). Not only were hip-hop’s sounds, lyrics and aesthetics incorporated in hood films, many rap artists also appeared in these movies, creating a “symbiotic relationship” that extended “beyond the range of narrative and visual imagery” (265).

On an ideological level, the music aesthetics of “new black cinema” (Harris 2008) both adopted and challenged the utopian spirit of the classical Hollywood musical (Dyer 1992, 24). While these aesthetics, and particularly “gangsta rap’s graphic depiction of space, place, and danger” (Forman 2002, 265), added to the dystopian gangster narratives of these films, they also expressed the musical’s “utopian sensibilities of energy, abundance, intensity, transparency, and community” (Harris 2008, 53). However, blaxploitation and hood films subverted the “colonial structure of feeling” of most integrated musicals (Dyer 1992, 26) by focussing on these sensibilities

6 For example, hooks (1994, 116), considers gangsta rap, and by extension hood films, as “a reflection of dominant values” that are “created and sustained by white supremacist capitalist” society and glorify “sexist, misogynist, patriarchal ways of thinking and behaving”.

7 Around the same time, a wave of urban crime films made by North African diasporic filmmakers materialized in France. The phenomenon of *le cinéma beur* (“ghetto youth cinema”) started in the mid-1980s when Maghrebi-French “*beur*” filmmakers

from an exclusively African American perspective based within black spaces, cultures and communities. At the same time, with the commercialization of hip hop from the 1990s, it has been argued that black youth culture has “moved out of the inner cities and into the mainstream of popular culture” (Blair 1993, 21), transforming resistant “cultural forms of oppressed communities” (Van der Meer in Blair 1993, 21) into conformist commercial commodities.⁶

In parallel with the production of blaxploitation and hood films, other African diasporic filmmakers within North America and Europe resorted to the genre of the black urban crime film as well. According to Naficy (2001, 4, 10), “postcolonial, Third World filmmakers” started to make films “in their Western sojourn” since the 1960s. Much like the films from black city cinema, many of the films from what Naficy (5) calls accented cinema portrayed “life in exile and diaspora” as bound to “sites of confinement and control” and “narratives of panic and pursuit”. From the 1970s onwards, various waves of black diasporic films set in cities in the global North came to light. For example, in the Anglo-Saxon world, a stream of black British films made in the 1970s and 1980s, such as *Pressure* (1975), *Black Joy* (1975), *Babylon* (1980) and *Burning an Illusion* (1981), presented hard-hitting, social-realist narratives of “Caribbean migration and settlement” in London (Guha 2015, 28). These urban dramas revolved around young Caribbean migrants living in the gritty suburbs of London, where they are struggling with the stresses of poverty, crime, violence and racism, and often find their only positive outlet in the local reggae scene. Like their African American counterparts, British Caribbean urban crime films often featured black urban soundtracks and artists.⁷ In Canada the urban crime dramas *Soul Survivor* (1995) and *Rude* (1995) marked “the first two feature films produced by Canadians of African descent” (Boslaugh 2008, 476), with that allegedly ushering in “a ‘new’ Black Canadian film aesthetic” (*The Review*, December 19, 2017). Both were set in “the Toronto Jamaican émigré community” and revolved around the racism- and crime-ridden urban “lives of persons of African descent” (Boslaugh 2008, 476). Altogether, these black urban crime films set the stage for the development of the genre in post-independent Jamaica.

The reggae-ghetto aesthetics of Jamaican urban crime films, 1972–1999

(mostly males) wanted to show from their point of view how they suffered from unemployment,

In the early 1970s, *THTC* became one of the first Caribbean films portraying the “political, economic, and social difficulties” (Ceccato 2015, 57) of urban life in the so-called developing world. With its music-driven gangster narrative set in downtown Kingston, Henzell’s “black film” (*JG*, July 7, 1972) not only

exclusion, and racism” in the outskirts of Paris (Stillman 2008, 71). Throughout the years, *beur* cinema developed into “a series of independently released films set in the rundown multi-ethnic working-class estates (the *cités*) on the periphery of France’s major cities (the *banlieues*), the most significant of which was Mathieu Kassovitz’s *La Haine* (1995)” (Tarr 2005, 2).

8 In the UK, *THTC* became “very successful” (*JG*, February 9, 1973) after Henzell “publicized the film himself” (*TIFF The Review*, December 2017). In the United States, the director again took “charge of the marketing and publicity of the film himself” after cancelling a distribution deal with New World Pictures, when he noticed they “targeted the film at the blaxploitation market” and promoted it as “*Super Fly* goes to Jamaica” (*TIFF The Review*, December 2017). Eventually, *The Harder They Come* became a “spectacular success” on “college and repertory screens” across cities in the United States and

became the first and “definite Jamaican film” (Bakari 2018, 191), but also, following closely after *Sweetback*, *Shaft*, and *Super Fly*, an early example of black city cinema. Upon its release in cinemas across the island, *THTC* “attracted full houses both in Kingston and in the country areas” (*JG*, September 24, 1972), superseding *The Sound of Music* (1965) as the highest-grossing film in Jamaica. Then, Henzell took his “locally produced film” (*JG*, June 6, 1972) abroad, to the United Kingdom, the United States and the rest of the world, where it gradually reached “cultist proportions” (*JG*, March 11, 2001).⁸ To this day, the film is celebrated as the “definitive postcolonial cult-movie musical” (*Village Voice*, June 6, 2012), one that, for the first time, offered “the world an accurate and entertaining window on Jamaica – its mass people, its reggae music, its Rastafarianism and its social classes” (*JG*, January 27, 1980).

As “the first truly Jamaican film” (*JG*, August 3, 1972), *THTC* was commended for both its ghetto and reggae aesthetics. On the one hand, the film was seen as a “gangster pic” that made “some trenchant points about poverty in Kingston” (London *Independent*, March 10, 2000). With its “uncompromising” portrayal of “shanty town poverty” (*JG*, August 3, 1972), *THTC* was considered “a distinct statement of protest against life along the bread-line” in urban Jamaica (*Irish Times* in *JG*, June 17, 1972). According to Rohlehr (1992, 96), Henzell’s film provided “a symbolic commentary on the first ten years of Jamaican independence, and an insight into the tensions of urban society in contemporary Jamaica”. Jimmy Cliff’s “small-time underworld character” (*JG*, November 5, 1972) was largely seen as “an ambitious young man” (*JG*, November 5, 1972) who “was driven to the gun by the Society which refused him even the most menial job” (*JG*, July 7, 1972). In Jamaica, the “ghetto film” (*JG*, February 22, 1976) was hailed as “a landmark in the Jamaican revolution of the poor and oppressed” (*JG*, September 12, 1978). Internationally, *THTC* joined the annals of Third Cinema (and its aesthetics of hunger and garbage) as a “means of communicating” the struggle to “reach national liberation” and as “a tool of national self-expression and identity” (*JG*, September 12, 1978).

On the other hand, “the Perry Henzell–Jimmy Cliff bombshell” (*JG*, January 27, 1980) was regarded as “one of the springboards from which reggae as the soul child of Jamaica really got going” on “the world scene” (*JG*, December 7, 1975). As film critic Nathelie Taylor indicates, the “correlation between reggae and film officially exploded” with the release of *THTC* (*JG*, December 5, 2004). The movie, with its “entirely reggae” soundtrack (*JG*, December 5, 2004), got named the Rock Movie of the Year by *Rolling Stone*. Supported by Chris Blackwell, the “Jamaican-born Brit[ish] ... chairman of Island Records” who made “an astute investment” in both the film and soundtrack, *THTC* became a key “early vehicle for the spread of reggae” (*New York Magazine*, December 7, 1987). Markedly, beyond the

around the globe
(*TIFF The Review*,
December 2017).

appearances and songs of Cliff and other Jamaican musicians, Henzell's film also made reggae its cultural and political "base" (*JG*, February 9, 1973). Dawes explains that *THTC* captured what he calls a "reggae aesthetic":

The Harder They Come was a 'reggae film', not simply because of the use of reggae music as part of the soundtrack, but ... above all the dynamic creative energies which were emerging from the 'grassroots' of urban Jamaican society ... In his film, Perry Henzell ensured that reggae was defined by Jamaicans, by those creating that music, with their own principles of beauty and artistic value ... Henzell's film shifted the dialogue by demonstrating that a new creative force was operating in the Caribbean, a force that emerged from the working-class milieu with a coherent, dynamic vision centred on the Jamaican imagination. (Dawes 1999, 27–28)

Much like the African American city films, and in line with the genre of the musical, *THTC* used popular culture to express the creative capacities and utopian sensibilities of the urban youth. The film's reggae aesthetics mirrored Cliff's character, who was "vibrant and full of energy" (Ceccato 2015, 58). As such, the film created a vision of Jamaica that was "fundamentally postcolonial" in the sense that it "shifted the balance of power in the areas of aesthetics and socio-political understanding" (Dawes 1999, 27–28).

In the decades after the film's success, other Jamaican and Jamaican diasporic filmmakers tried to follow its example. The "depiction of violence in the Jamaican urban landscape" (Bakari 2018, 192) became a common theme in Jamaican filmmaking. According to Ceccato (2015, 57–61), Henzell's film served as "a model and point of comparison for Jamaican film" and established a "trend towards the urban", with most "later directors shooting in Kingston". As a result, as Francis (2011, 125) observes, Jamaican films often contained "fictional tales of the city and crime" in the tradition of *THTC*. At the same time, most subsequent films also tried to capture the vibrancy and creativity of reggae. Ceccato (2015, 59) notes that "Jamaican cinema post-Henzell" has largely been made up of three groups of music-driven films: "Movies in which [1] one or more characters are popular singers ... [2] music is part of the plot ... [3] the soundtrack comments on and participates in the scenes". In many Jamaican and Jamaican diasporic films, reggae is related to "the music business" and "the downtown dancehall" (Ceccato 2015, 59). In turn, both the business and the dancehall are commonly associated with crime and violence, with reggae artists and businessmen often being involved in both the music and crime scenes in downtown Kingston. In other words, the reggae and ghetto aesthetics of Jamaican films operate in magnetic conjunction, forming an interwoven and unified "reggae-ghetto aesthetics" that shape their narrative poetics and cultural politics.

In the years following *THTC*, two attempts were made by Caribbean American filmmakers to shoot a film in Jamaica. First, William Greaves, a

Hollywood-based filmmaker of Jamaican descent, was asked by Jamaican boxing promoter Lucien Chen to direct *The Marijuana Affair* (1974). The story revolved around a black American detective investigating “the exploitation of drugs from the island to Miami” (JG, November 18, 1974). During his investigation the detective, played by Bahamian-born actor Calvin Lockhart, encounters “corruption among government officials and high ranking members of the police force” (*Jamaica Observer*, January 25, 2012), including a white American detective who is in Jamaica “to undermine the marijuana dealings” (*Philadelphia Inquirer*, December 9, 1976) but smuggles cocaine back to the United States. Like *THTC*, *The Marijuana Affair* zoomed in on corruption, the drug trade and “violence in the country” (*Jamaica Observer*, January 25, 2012). However, unlike Henzell’s movie, Greaves’ “tropical Jamaican film” (JG, February 12, 1976) did not build on “reggae archetypes and motifs” (Dawes 1999, 27). Reportedly, the “formula” of *The Marijuana Affair* was derived from “American blaxploitation films” but “lacking in Jamaica atmosphere” (JG, December 13, 1975). Upon completion, the “hurriedly made black exploitation feature” (Knee and Musser 1992, 22) only had a limited release in Jamaica and the United States before fading into obscurity.

While in Jamaica for *The Marijuana Affair*, Lockhart developed the idea for another film project on the island, *Every Nigger Is a Star* (1974, ENIAS). According to James (2016, 63), Lockhart’s first film as a director was “indicative of the kind of work he wanted to do beyond what was being offered to him in Hollywood”. *ENIAS* revolved around a man who embarks on a “journey to return to his home in Jamaica” and, along the way, meets up with various “reggae bands of the time” (“Every Nigger is a Star” 2018). As such, the film featured the island’s “ghettos” with its “early reggae ambassadors” (James 2016, 65–67). Because of their appearances, as well as the film’s focus, style and soundtrack, *ENIAS* was “tagged derisively as a ‘reggae film’” (67). Despite his blaxploitation image, Lockhart intended his project as a documentary-like “activist film” that “tried to capture the culture of the post-independence Caribbebean and showcase black creativity” (“Every Nigger is a Star” 2018). However, upon its release, Jamaican film critic Barbara Blake-Hannah described *ENIAS* as “an unintentional spoof of all the blaxploitation and kung fu films ever made” (JG, January 27, 1980). As a result, Lockhart’s “poorly done” film (*Jamaica Observer*, March 24, 2015) had “the shortest ... run in Jamaican film history” (JG, January 27, 1980). Like *The Marijuana Affair*, *ENIAS* “flopped” (JG, March 1, 2001) and “disappeared shortly after its release” (James 2016, 57).

Despite the failure of Lockhart’s “abortive flick” (JG, September 25, 1979), a few years later the New York-based Greek director Ted Bafaloukos came to Jamaica to shoot *Rockers* (1978), another documentary-like film exploring

“the tribulations of an under-class” by following a plethora of “Jamaican reggae performers” in downtown Kingston (Warner 2000, 91–94). In fact, Bafaloukos originally envisioned his “first movie” (*JG*, October 12, 1977) as a documentary about the island’s reggae scene. The project gradually developed into an unscripted “natural unfolding” of fictional events (*Jamaica Observer*, January 25, 2012). Eventually, the “life-like story” (*JG*, October 12, 1977) came to revolve around reggae drummer Leroy “Horsemouth” Wallace who tries to “boost himself and his family up from a borderline economic existence” by distributing records (*JG*, September 17, 1979). When his motorcycle gets stolen, the “ghetto Rastaman” (Fulani 2005) not only aims to recover his vehicle, but also seeks revenge for its unjust theft by the “music ‘Mafia’” (Warner 2000, 92). During his quest, Horsemouth moves through “the Jamaican ghetto and music industry” (*UDiscover Music*, July 9, 2018). Much like *THTC*, *Rockers* presented an urban crime story with “an anti-establishment tone” that explored “the theme of exploitation in the music business” (Warner 2000, 92) through the eyes of a poor Jamaican musician who struggles to get into the business. The film’s reggae-ghetto aesthetics emphasized the conditions of urban poverty in Trenchtown, yet at the same time portrayed the neighbourhood as a prideful creative environment and spirited musical community – to the extent that Blake-Hannah described *Rockers* as “the ultimate hippy fantasy about the Jamaican music ghetto world” (*JG*, January 27, 1978). Although Bafaloukos’ film did not do very well in Jamaica, it experienced a “fairly successful” limited release (*JG*, November 23, 1979) in the United States and United Kingdom, the markets for which *Rockers* was mainly intended. Largely promoted as a non-American blaxploitation film, “the film’s purpose was primarily to bring Rastafarian culture and music to an international audience” (Fulani 2005). In North America and Europe, *Rockers* became seen as “a rich and vital successor” to *THTC* (*JG*, September 25, 1979). There, both films were, and continue to be, celebrated as “vibrant, thrilling and raw testimonies” of Jamaican urban life that “helped cement reggae’s place as a part of the music landscape” (*UDiscover Music*, July 9, 2018).

While *Rockers* inspired two Jamaican films capturing “the lifestyle of the country’s Rastafarians” in the 1980s (Warner 2000, 92) – *Children of Babylon* (1980) and *Countryman* (1982), both set in the countryside – it was not until the 1990s that another “locally-produced feature film” (*JG*, March 26, 2012) was shot in Kingston. This was *Kla\$h* (1995), a “crime tale” (*Hollywood Reporter*, August 21, 2015) directed by African American filmmaker Bill Parker. The film’s story revolved around a black American photographer who is on “assignment to cover a klash concert” in Kingston but gets seduced by a “streetwise hustler” who is involved with “a local ganglord” organizing a robbery of the reggae concert box office (*JG*, August 23, 1996). Parker drew on the genres of the “concert film” and the “thriller”,

combining “a clutch of reggae band performances” (*Variety*, January 30, 1995) and “crime drama with exiting action” (*ScreenAnarchy*, February 5, 2017). Blake-Hannah valued the film for its original and authentic portrayal of dancehall: “*Kla\$h* does for the dancehall genre ... what *The Harder They Come* did for reggae 20 years ago ... The film is ... an interesting window into the culture” (*JG*, March 13, 1996). Despite its strong “musical underpinnings” (*Variety*, January 30, 1995), including “an impressive list of artistes ... performing an equally impressive number of songs” (Warner 2000, 105), in Jamaica *Kla\$h* mainly received “large doses of negative response” for its violent depiction of the island’s urban life, which “led to a curtailed run” in the theatres (Warner 2000, 104–106). In addition, despite its world premiere at Sundance, the “unfortunate local full-length movie” (*JG*, April 21, 1997) also did not do well internationally. With a budget of about US\$4 million, *Kla\$h* did not become the “cinematic success” that was anticipated (*JG*, March 11, 2001).

In the late 1990s the tradition of Jamaican crime films depicting “the difficulties of African Jamaican urban life experiences in the post-colonial era” (Calvin 2010, 14) continued with *Dancehall Queen* and *Third World Cop*.⁹ These two local productions, both “filmed in Kingston” (*JG*, April 21, 1997), became Jamaica’s biggest box office hits, both surpassing the long-standing record of *THTC*. In contrast to the three previous urban crime films set in Jamaica, *Dancehall Queen* and *Third World Cop* were not necessarily intended for the international market. They were first and foremost “targeted at Jamaican audiences”, with the idea that they “could turn a healthy profit” from their domestic theatrical run (*London Independent*, March 10, 2000). Both were productions financed by Island Jamaica Films (later, Palm Pictures), the company of Chris Blackwell that was established to produce “a series of low-budget films being shot on location in Jamaica” (*JG*, May 18, 1997). On the one hand, they were among the “first feature films to be shot and post-produced on DVC” (digital video cameras), which meant that the “production costs were very low” (*Ecrans d’Afrique*, June 1997). On the other hand, *Dancehall Queen* and *Third World Cop* turned out to be, as Blackwell noted, “the first Jamaican films in ages that have really resonated with Jamaican audiences” (*London Independent*, March 10, 2000). They became “Jamaica’s highest grossing film[s]” (*JG*, June 27, 1999) and, partly due to their box office success at home, also “did well on the overseas circuit” (*JG*, September 10, 1999).

According to film critic Geoffrey Macnab (*London Independent*, March 10, 2000), *Dancehall Queen* and *Third World Cop* chiefly consisted of the same ingredients as their benchmark predecessor twenty-five years previously: “The mix in both is similar to that in *The Harder They Come*: gangsters, sex, romance and reggae”. In particular, the films confirmed “the relationship between reggae and film” (*JG*, December 5, 2004). *Dancehall Queen* and

9 In between *Dancehall Queen* and *Third World Cop*, another black urban crime film partially set in Kingston was released in the theatres: *Belly* (1998). This film, written, directed and co-produced by African American music video director Harold “Hype” Williams, was mainly set in New York, but also partly in Kingston. *Belly* told the story of two black ghetto youths who make a good living by dealing drugs and pulling armed robberies when they realise that they have to change their lives to escape death and to become better persons. The film featured dancehall artists such as Jr. Demus, the Ouch!

Girls and Lious Rankin and contained songs from dancehall singers Sean Paul and Mr. Vegas. However, *Belly* was mainly considered an African American production as the film was produced by an African American company, had a predominantly African American cast and crew, and focussed primarily on African American urban life.

Third World Cop were conceived as “music-driven movies” that heavily relied on “strong [dancehall] soundtracks” (JG, May 18, 1997) and “the use of deejays” to “draw more attention” (JG, June 17, 2001). *Dancehall Queen* featured Lady Saw and Beenie Man as themselves and in *Third World Cop* several “popular reggae/dancehall artists made an appearance on screen” (JG, December 5, 2004). Moreover, the story of *Dancehall Queen* centred on the downtown dancehall. Directed by Rick Elgood and Don Letts, “Island Jamaica Films’ first full-length Jamaican movie” (JG, May 18, 1997) again revolved around a poor hustler, this time an “impoverished single mother” (London *Independent*, March 10, 2000) who aims to get out of a “harrowing, violence-ridden ghetto” by becoming a dancehall dancer (*Variety*, October 26, 1997). The film followed the “genuine Downtown Kingston higgler” in her attempt to “win a Dancehall Queen contest” that would “end her financial problems” (JG, August 4, 1997). According to Warner (2000, 110), *Dancehall Queen*, like *THTC*, reflected “the realities of the daily struggle of ghetto life” by showing “the lengths to which a person will go to escape the curse of poverty”. One critic at the time stated the film mirrored “the impurities” of Kingston’s “social climate”, including the violence by “urban thugs” (JG, August 4, 1997). As such, as another critic noted, *Dancehall Queen* showed “the raw, crude and tattered flip-side” of Jamaica’s “picture-perfect postcard” (JG, August 17, 1997).

Soon after the success of *Dancehall Queen*, Blackwell decided to produce another “low-budget, high-tech production” in Jamaica (London *Independent*, March 10, 2000), which became *Third World Cop*. Although music was not so much part of the plot of this “follow-up film” (JG, September 14, 1998), the “action-packed, human and realistic film” (JG, June 27, 1999) again heavily relied on reggae-ghetto aesthetics. Director Chris Browne presented a “classic Jamaican ‘police-and-thief’ story” (JG, June 13, 1999) set in “gritty streets of Kingston’s inner-city communities” (JG, June 27, 1999). The story followed a “no-nonsense, unrighteous, cunning detective who is driven by the challenge to eradicate crime in this Third World society” (JG, June 13, 1999) and “his childhood best friend” who “operates as the chief man” of the drug lord controlling the garrison community they grew up in (JG, June 27, 1999). Again, the film was reviewed as “a mirror of the nation’s violent reality” (JG, October 7, 1999). One critic stated *Third World Cop* “captured the essence of ghetto/street life in its stark reality” (JG, October 7, 1999). Notably, the film’s premiere in Jamaica was postponed due to an “upsurge of violence” in the country in July 1999 (JG, July 18, 1999), which prompted the Jamaican government to “impose curfews and send troops into several communities” in Kingston and Spanish Town (JG, July 19, 1999). Although the film allegedly contained “a strong anti-crime message”, Blackwell “felt that the graphic portrayal of violence depicted in the film may not be judicious at this time” (JG, July

18, 1999). When *Third World Cop* eventually premiered in October 1999, the “low-budget crime movie” (JG, July 19, 1999), like *Dancehall Queen*, “broke box office records locally and internationally” (JG, March 21, 2000).

The reggae-ghetto aesthetics of Jamaican urban crime films, 2000–2018

With the success of *Dancehall Queen* and *Third World Cop*, it was anticipated that Jamaican filmmaking was finally “coming to its own” (JG, May 28, 2006). Hope was raised that it marked the beginning of “a vibrant movie industry in Jamaica” (JG, September 28, 1999). However, in the following years only a few “local films” (JG, September 15, 2002) were being shot on the island, and none of them focussed on “squalid ghetto life” in downtown Kingston (JG, October 7, 1999). In fact, in the 2000s, the genre of the black urban crime film was largely taken over by Jamaican filmmakers based in the United States. Over the next decade or so, they produced a cycle of low-budget urban gangster/gangsta films that detailed “the life of ghetto youth in Kingston” moving to or between “urban centers” in the United States (JG, March 11, 2001), notably *Shottas* (2002), *Rude Boy* (2003) and *Out the Gate* (2011). While their predecessors all presented local crime stories confined within the borders of Kingston (with an occasional trip to the countryside or beach), these three Jamaican films – as well as a stream of straight-to-DVD Jamaican gangsta movies such as *Gangsta’s Paradise* (2004), *Cop and a Badman* (2011) and *Jamaican Maffia* (2014) – focussed on transnational organized crime, particularly the drug trade, taking shape between Kingston and US cities.¹⁰ Typically, the “narco-narratives” (Frydman 2015) of these movies opened with some scenes depicting “a slice of Jamaican life” (JG, March 11, 2001), featuring young ghetto dwellers in downtown Kingston who, usually after a violent childhood, move to Miami or Los Angeles in search of a better life.

Like the earlier Jamaican urban crime movies, these Jamaican gangsta films were music-driven. Again, “members of the music fraternity” were often “given movie roles” (JG, June 17, 2001). At the same time, these artists usually also contributed to the films’ dancehall soundtracks. For example, *Shottas*, the first and foremost Jamaican “urban flick” (JG, March 11, 2001), written, directed and produced by Jamaica-born, US-based filmmaker Cess Silvera, featured the “modern reggae stars” Ky-Mani Marley and Spragga Benz in the lead roles (*Broward Palm Beach New Times*, October 18, 2013). The film chronicled the lives of two Jamaican youngsters who grow up in downtown Kingston to become “top shottas” (JG, July 25, 2004) operating in transnational criminal networks. First, after being deported from Miami (where they had moved in their childhood with false

10 In 2009 several Jamaican newspapers reported on the pre-production of another feature film by a Jamaican diasporic filmmaker dealing with transnational organized crime: *Urban Smuggler*. This film, based on the “true-life story” from the bestselling book of the same name by British-born Jamaican Andrew Pritchard, would focus on “the world of hardcore drugs and its shipment [from Jamaica]

throughout Britain's major ports" (*Sunday Herald*, September 28, 2008). The production was anticipated as "a major international film" and the "first film to be made under the Anglo-Jamaican film production treaty" (*Sunday Herald*, September 28, 2008). However, to date, the film has not materialized.

11 In one interview Silvera for example stated: "This is a movie from the streets of Jamaica ... this is what life is like ... *Shottas* is for ... the kids in Jamaica who grew up in the slums, who have no option, they don't have an education, they don't have a dad, there's no one around. I wanted to show if this trend continues, we're going to create monsters like [in the film] ... These characters are what I know; I lived with these characters every day, and raised by many of these characters ... It's a very dear story to

visas after an armed robbery), they work their way up in Kingston's underworld circuit by indulging "in a life of drugs and crime" (*JG*, December 5, 2004). Then, when the net around them is closing in, they again move to Miami with false papers, where they try violently to take over the city's criminal underworld.

Shottas was promoted as following in "the tradition of *The Harder They Come* and *Scarface*" and reviewed as "Jamaica's *Boyz n the Hood*" (*Broward Palm Beach New Times*, October 18, 2013). The film already had "a cult following" before it was released in the United States in 2006 (*Jamaica Observer*, February 22, 2016), when an unfinished version appeared in the bootleg market. When the film arrived in Jamaica in 2004, *Shottas* received considerable criticism for its "romanticized or, at best, uncritical representation of traumatic violence as rites of passage for poor urban youth" (Smith 2012/2013, 155). The film appeared at a time of much talk in the Jamaican newspapers about the rise of "poor ghetto youth" turning into "shottas" involved in "the cocaine business" (*JG*, July 25, 2004) and the island's music industry "glorify[ing] the gun and drug trade" (*JG*, June 7, 2002). *Shottas* was referred to as "a pictorial view" that provided another "inspiration for our youngsters to use guns and drugs" (*JG*, May 14, 2004). Silvera, who himself had grown up in downtown Kingston, defended his debut film by arguing it provided an authentic, critical and personal account of Jamaican urban life.¹¹ Eventually, *Shottas* was only partially a "Jamaica-based movie" (*JG*, December 5, 2004), as most of the film was both shot and set in the United States. In addition, as Silvera and his crew were chiefly based there, they were mainly referred to as an "overseas team" coming to Jamaica for "local filming" (*JG*, April 10, 2001).

The same applied to the two Jamaican urban crime films that came after *Shottas*. *Rude Boy* and *Out the Gate* were largely shot and set in California, portraying Los Angeles as the go-to place for poor Jamaican youngsters in search of "a better life" (*JG*, June 7, 2002). Both told the "story of a youth" going to LA "to pursue his dream of making it big in the music business" (*JG*, August 28, 2011). In doing so, the films again dealt with topics such as "the music industry, migration and the issue of donmanship" (*JG*, May 17, 2011). In *Rude Boy*, a "Jamaica-to-LA action pic" (*East Bay Express*, February 19, 2003) produced by California-based 3G Films run by Chelsea Brown, Desmond Gumbs and Trenten Gumbs (all three of West Indian descent), "an aspiring singer" agrees to run drugs for "a drug don" in exchange for a US visa (*JG*, June 7, 2002). When he cannot find a job to launch his music career, he becomes a "hit man in the service of the behemoth drug trafficker" (*East Bay Express*, February 19, 2003). Several Jamaican musical artists were part of the cast and the soundtrack consisted of a "mix in reggae and hip-hop" (*East Bay Express*, February 19, 2003).

me” (*Movieweb*, November 2, 2006).

12 In between the release of *Rude Boy* and *Out the Gate*, 3G Films produced two other low-budget gangster films set in Kingston and California. *Gangsta’s Paradise* and *Cop and a Badman* were both directed by Trenten Gumbs. It seems these two films did not have an official release in Jamaican theatres and only had very limited screenings in the United States before going straight to DVD – the market for which they were presumably intended. *Gangsta’s Paradise* was largely set in Los Angeles, where a drug baron finds himself in trouble with both the Italian mafia and Jamaican yardies. *Cop and a Badman* revolved around a Jamaican police detective who is sent to Oakland by his government to

In the “urban action picture” *Out the Gate* (JG, October 15, 2011), directed by Steven Johnson and Qmillion, an aspiring singer is similarly pushed to criminal gang activities by the poverty he experiences when migrating to LA. Once again, the movie was touted as a “musically driven film” (JG, October 15, 2011). While the lead role was reserved for Jamaican reggae singer-songwriter Everton Dennis, the film featured various Jamaican dancehall artists, both in supporting roles and on the soundtrack. Both *Rude Boy* and *Out the Gate* first played in “select markets” in the United States (JG, August 28, 2011) before making their debut in Jamaica. While *Rude Boy* was generally considered a “one-dimensional low-budget flick” with “obvious flaws” – notably its glorification of “the gun and drug trade” (JG, June 7, 2002) – *Out the Gate* was usually reviewed positively for putting “Jamaican struggles in the spotlight” (JG, November 2, 2011). Still, in general, Jamaican gangster films have often received similar criticism as hood movies for seeking to “critique ‘the gangsta’” but ending up circulating “gangsta cool” (Wilson and O’Sullivan 2004, 86).¹²

The early 2010s, after an absence of more than ten years, witnessed the release of three “Jamaican movies made by Jamaican directors” (London *Independent*, March 10, 2000) set in downtown Kingston. The first two, *Better Mus’ Come* (2010) and *Ghett’a Life*, provided more historically and politically contextualized accounts of crime and violence than the Jamaican and Jamaican urban crime films of the 1990s and 2000s. In fact, *Better Mus’ Come*, the feature film debut of Jamaican filmmaker Storm Saulter, was the first historical drama to come out of Jamaica. This “explosive drama” (JG, June 6, 2008) revolved around a young man trying to escape from “the prevailing hardships of life in the ghettos of central downtown Kingston ... against a backdrop of the political turmoil of 1970s Jamaica” (JG, May 8, 2008). As a “dramatic telling of the Green Bay Massacre” of 1978, the film showed how he gets involved in “politically fueled gang warfare” (*New York Times*, March 14, 2013). Although *Better Mus’ Come* was privately financed in the United States (JG, September 28, 2008), the film was labelled a “totally Jamaican production” (JG, June 9, 2008) for being “written, produced, directed and performed by Jamaicans” (JG, October 10, 2010). It featured Sheldon Shepherd of Jamaican reggae band No-Maddz as the “leading male” (JG, October 14, 2010) and was driven by the “hypnotic pulse” of the soundtrack’s “reggae beats” (*IonCinema*, March 13, 2013). In terms of its poetics and politics, *Better Mus’ Come* shared with *THTC* the reggae-ghetto aesthetics of “the bad bwai, the trickster hero, the culture of violence, sexuality and political outspokenness” (Dawes 1999, 27). Saulter’s “dark tale” (JG, October 10, 2010) was quickly considered a worthy successor to Henzell’s film, largely for its “creative brilliance” (JG, October 16, 2010), “well-told story of Jamaica” (JG, June 11, 2008), and “social commentary” (JG, October 14, 2010). *Better Mus’*

locate and return
three Jamaican
criminals and the
crown jewels they
stole.

Come did well in local cinemas and also made “waves across the region and the international community” (JG, November 21, 2011), becoming a “landmark in Caribbean film-making” (JG, September 28, 2012).

Ghett’a Life, the second Jamaican film directed by Chris Browne, also focussed on the violent garrison politics in downtown Kingston. This time, the story was set in the present and told through the eyes of a inner-city teenager who wants to become a professional boxer while “facing a country, community and family conflicted by a divisive political system” (JG, August 23, 2012). Promoted as an “‘against the odds’ drama set in downtown Kingston”, the film was “committed to an authentic depiction” of Jamaican inner-city life (JG, August 23, 2012). Reminiscent of *THTC*, *Ghett’a Life* aimed to provide a critique of the everyday poverty and violence stemming from “the politics rife in Kingston’s inner cities” (JG, June 19, 2011). Notably, the film was less music-driven than most of its predecessors, though the soundtrack incorporated a “reggae-soul flavour” (*Billboard*, February 5, 2011). While Browne stated that *Ghett’a Life* was made for Jamaicans “in Jamaica and abroad” (JG, August 23, 2012), the production did not commence until an “estimated US\$1 million budget” was raised (JG, May 19, 2006) to secure the film’s “international calibre” (JG, July 10, 2011). When *Ghett’a Life* was eventually released, the “hit Jamaican movie” (JG, October 9, 2016) enjoyed “widespread popularity” in Jamaica and was also screened in “selected cinemas” across the UK (JG, August 23, 2012).

Then, in 2013, Jamaican filmmaker Mary Wells released *Kingston Paradise* (2013) at film festivals in North America, her “first feature-length drama” (JG, August 30, 2009) and the first to be directed by a Jamaican woman. This “offbeat urban thriller” followed a “young hustler/taxi driver desperate to escape a life of poverty and violence in Kingston” (JG, September 11, 2013). Dealing much less explicitly with garrison politics, *Kingston Paradise* offered a “different view” (JG, September 11, 2013) of downtown Kingston than many of its predecessors within the genre. The film depicted the inner-city as a social place where ghetto dwellers, though amid poverty and violence, live and work as ordinary people with regular jobs. At the same time, although *Kingston Paradise* featured Jamaican dancehall artists Demarco and Wayne Marshall in cameo appearances, the film largely refrained from using reggae motifs and songs – a first for a Jamaican urban crime film. After several festival selections and awards across the world, the film had a brief run in Jamaican theatres (JG, July 2, 2015).

Apart from the three locally produced urban crime films that appeared in Jamaican theatres in the 2010s, the current decade also witnessed the releases of three “international projects” (JG, January 9, 2018) that were partly set in downtown Kingston. The first, *Home Again* (2012), was done by Jamaican-born, Toronto-based filmmaker Jennifer Holness and her Jamaican Canadian

husband David Sutherland. This “Canadian drama” (*JG*, September 18, 2013) told three personal “exile tales” (*The Georgia Straight*, March 21, 2013) showing “the atrocities and struggles Jamaican deportees face on their return to the island” after “being abroad since infancy” (*JG*, September 16, 2013). Once “landed in Kingston” (*JG*, September 16, 2013), the three characters each embark on a journey “to find their place in what is effectively a foreign country” (*JG*, September 13, 2012) – two of them, a homeless teenager and gangster hitman, within the borders of downtown Kingston. The film provided a critique of the “catastrophic and fundamentally racist policy” (*JG*, September 13, 2012) concerning the deportation of lawful immigrant residents from Canada, the United States and the United Kingdom and their marginal status in Jamaica upon forced return. With *Home Again*, the Jamaican Canadian filmmakers wanted to “give a voice to Jamaica’s deportee population” (*The Georgia Straight*, March 21, 2013) and to make an intervention into the political process of deportation. After the film, which contained a “reggae-washed soundtrack” (*The Georgia Straight*, March 21, 2013), achieved “number one at Canadian box offices” and was “screened to sold out audiences” in Trinidad and Tobago, where it was shot, *Home Again* was also released “on its own soil” in Jamaica (*JG*, September 20, 2013).

The second “international production” (*JG*, February 12, 2017) in the 2010s set in downtown Kingston was *King of the Dancehall* (2016, *KOTD*), an urban drama written, directed, produced and starred by African American “rapper/actor turned movie producer” (*JG*, February 12, 2017) Nick Cannon. In contrast to *Home Again*, the production was “filmed mostly in Jamaica” (*JG*, September 4, 2016). *KOTD* presented a “typical rags-to-riches by way of dancing tale” about Tarzan, a New York hustler who decides to go to Kingston to “set up a marijuana pipeline back to Brooklyn” (*Lainey Gossip*, September 14, 2016) yet “ends up falling in love with the culture and the dancehall scene” (*JG*, September 11, 2016). He quickly learns how to dance from his love interest and “almost immediately becomes the hero of the dancehall scene, upsetting a rival drug dealer in the process” (*Lainey Gossip*, September 14, 2016). *KOTD* most literally and unapologetically combined the musical with the gangster film, with Tarzan “refining his dance skills, while also building up his weed operation” (*Hollywood Reporter*, December 9, 2016). Though “part crime drama” (*IndieWire*, September 12, 2016), the film was mainly touted as a “high-energy musical” set in “vibrant Kingston” (*The Tropicixs*, August 30, 2016). The symbiotic relationship between the dancehall scene and the film production was also apparent in the on-screen appearance of various Jamaican dancehall artists. In addition, Beenie Man participated as the narrator of *KOTD*, which carried “the same name as the popular song from his 2004

album” (*JG*, September 4, 2016). However, while Cannon’s aim was to capture “the true story of dancehall culture” (*Vibe*, August 5, 2017), upon release *KOTD* was largely dubbed as “a disappointment” (*JG*, February 12, 2017). The “dancehall movie” (*Urban Islandz*, September 20, 2016) blended stereotypical “tropes and tricks” (*IndieWire*, September 12, 2016) from both reggae and ghetto aesthetics. In fact, the film indulged in a “ridiculous” (*Lainey Gossip*, September 14, 2016) reggae-ghetto storyline by almost fully conflating the Kingston music and crime scenes. In the film the drug dealers and lords are also the dancehall DJs and venue owners, or, as Tarzan mentions, “gangsters during the day, dancers at night”. *King of the Dancehall* portrayed downtown Kingston as the ultimate – and ultimately exotic – “gangsta cool” place. Although the film premiered at the Toronto International Film Festival, it never made it “to the big screen” before it was “picked up by YouTube” for digital distribution (*JG*, February 12, 2017).

In the same year, black British actor Idris Elba was “spotted in Jamaica” for his first feature film as a director, *Yardie* (*JG*, May 18, 2017). Adopted from the popular 1992 debut novel by Jamaican-born British writer Victor Headley, *Yardie* was, following *Better Mus’ Come*, the second historical film about a young Jamaican who is trying to escape from his downtown life. This time, the “crime drama” (*JG*, September 1, 2018) was largely set in the 1980s and only partially shot in Kingston. Two-thirds of the action takes place in London, where the protagonist is sent “with a kilo of coke strapped to his leg” (*Hollywood Reporter*, January 24, 2018). From this moment onwards, the “higher-budget genre piece” becomes a “portrait of warring underworld expats in London’s East End” (*Variety*, January 26, 2018). The film’s “opening act, set in the rough-and-tumble Jamaican capital of Kingston” (*Variety*, January 26, 2018), resembles the format of the Jamaican urban crime film. Here, the “Jamaican crime saga” follows a country boy to the “bloody streets in Kingston”, where he ends up in the “drug fuelled gang rivalry” (*IndieWire*, January 27, 2018) as a pupil of a “music producer-gangster” (*DMovies*, August 27, 2018). As in many of its reggae-ghetto predecessors, *Yardie* depicts the Jamaican music and crime businesses as being related. This connection is continued in London, where a white Jamaican gangster is “ruling over the Hackney crime and music scene” (*DMovies*, August 27, 2018). Throughout the film, reggae aesthetics are maintained through the use of “Jamaica’s vibrant patois, palette and reggae-ruled playlist” (*Variety*, January 26, 2018). In addition, the story of the “gangster film” (*JG*, January 21, 2018) explores “British–Jamaican relations” through portrayals of the immigrant experience and the “cultural exchange” of the Windrush generation (*DMovies*, August 27, 2018). In sum, “beyond the tropes of gangsters, drugs, and retribution”, *Yardie* offers “a historical look at Jamaican styles, sounds, and landscape[s]” on

both sides of the Atlantic (*JG*, September 4, 2018). Although being a “British–Jamaican” production (*JG*, September 4, 2018), the movie has been celebrated as a “Jamaican film” because it was “filmed on Jamaican soil with Jamaican production crews and Jamaican talent” and, once again, told a “Jamaican story” (*JG*, January 21, 2018) of crime and music in downtown Kingston.

Epilogue

In 2015 it was announced that Marlon James’ *A Brief History of Seven Killings* (2014, *ABHOSK*) would be adapted for the screen. Only about half a year after its release, the Booker Prize-winning novel was optioned by HBO and planned as a television series to be written by the Jamaican author in collaboration with US screenwriter Eric Roth (*IndieWire*, December 12, 2015). Two years later, in 2017, it was reported that Melina Matsoukas, the US music video and television director partly of Jamaican descent, was assigned to “sit in the director’s chair” of the TV adaptation and that the “passion project” had found “its home at Amazon to develop the series” (*JG*, October 29, 2017). At the time of writing, the project was still in pre-production (*JG*, February 18, 2018), with provisional plans for “destination filming” on the island (*JG*, January 9, 2018). With the TV adaptation of *ABHOSK* in the making, another reggae-based “story of Jamaican violence” (*Telegraph*, July 29, 2015) will be appearing on the screen. Beginning with “the attempted assassination of reggae icon Bob Marley” in 1976, the adaptation will, like the novel, explore “the brutal realities of gang wars in the Kingston ghettos and their spread to New York” and their entrenchment in “roots, reggae, mysticism and politics” (*Hollywood Reporter*, November 25, 2017). Once more, downtown Kingston will be the setting of an audiovisual account of the socioeconomic exigencies and ethnocultural energies of post-independent Jamaica.

Throughout the nearly fifty-year history of the Jamaican fictional cinema, the dominant genre of the black urban crime film has represented downtown Kingston as “a city of contradictions” (Howard 2005, 2), with dystopian images of civil unrest, gang violence and drug wars coexisting with utopian images of ghetto dwellers as a musical community recording reggae rhythms and throwing dancehall parties. Over the years, the reggae-ghetto aesthetics of Jamaican urban crime films have variously humanized and mythologized “the reality of life in downtown Kingston” (*JG*, April 11, 2012). Almost half a century after *THTC*, Jamaican city cinema continues to negotiate the “popular cultural imaginary” (Jaffe 2012, 674) of downtown Kingston at the crossroads of local (im)mobilities and global commodities.

Funding



This essay is part of the research project “Worlds of Imagination”, funded by the European Research Council (ERC) under the European Union’s Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme (grant agreement 681663).

References

- Armes, Roy. 1987. *Third World Film Making and the West*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Bakari, Imruh. 2018. “The Jamaican Gangster Film: Badman, Rude Bwoys, and Dons.” In *A Companion to the Gangster Film*, edited by George S. Larke-Walsh, 182–207. Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell.
- Blair, M. Elizabeth. 1993. “Commercialization of the Rap Music Youth Subculture.” *The Journal of Popular Culture* 27 (3): 21–33.
- Boslaugh, Sarah. 2008. “Film (North America).” In *Africa and the Americas: Culture, Politics, and History*, edited by Richard M. Juang and Noelle Morrisette, 475–477. Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO.
- Calvin, Marlene. 2010. *Diasporic Lives: Alienation and Violence as Themes in African American and Jamaican Cultural Texts*. Berlin: LIT Verlag.
- Ceccato, Sabrina. 2015. “Cinema in Jamaica – Legacy of The Harder They Come.” *Imaginations* 6 (2): 54–67.
- Cham, Mbye, ed. 1992. *Ex-Iles: Essays on Caribbean Cinema*. Trenton: Africa World Press.
- Dawes, Kwame. 1999. *Natural Mysticism: Towards a New Reggae Aesthetic in Caribbean Writing*. Leeds: Peepal Tree.
- Duffett, Mark. 2013. “Ghetto Voyeurism? Cross-Racial Listening and the Attribution of Sociocultural Distance in Popular Music.” *Volume!* 10 (1): 111–125. doi:10/4000/volume.3820.
- Dürr, Eveline, and Rivke Jaffe. 2012. “Theorizing Slum Tourism: Performing, Negotiating and Transforming Inequality.” *European Review of Latin American and Caribbean Studies* | *Revista Europea de Estudios Latinoamericanos y del Caribe* 93: 113–123.
- Dyer, Richard. 1992. *Only Entertainment*. London: Routledge.
- “Every Nigger is a Star (lost Calvin Lockhart film; 1973–1974).” 2018. *Lost Media Wiki*. [https://www.lostmediawiki.com/Every_Nigger_is_a_Star_\(lost_Calvin_Lockhart_film;_1973-1974\)](https://www.lostmediawiki.com/Every_Nigger_is_a_Star_(lost_Calvin_Lockhart_film;_1973-1974)).
- Forman, Murray. 2002. *The ‘Hood Comes First: Race, Space, and Place in Rap and Hip-Hop*. Middletown: Wesleyan University Press.
- Francis, Terri. 2011. “Sounding the Nation: Martin Rennalls and the Jamaica Film Unit.” *Film History: An International Journal* 23 (2): 110–128.
- Frydman, Jason. 2015. “Narco-narratives and Transnational Form: The Geopolitics of Citation in the Circum-Caribbean.” *Postmodern Culture* 26 (1). doi:10.1353/pmc.2015.0023.
- Fulani, Ifeona. 2005. “Representations of the Body of the New Nation in *The Harder They Come* and *Rockers*.” *Anthurium: A Caribbean Studies Journal* 3 (1). <https://anthurium.miami.edu/articles/abstract/10.33596/anth.30/>.
- Garland, Christopher. 2013. “The Rhetoric of Crisis and Foreclosing the Future of Haiti in *Ghosts of Cité Soleil*.” In *Haiti and the Americas*, edited by Carla Calargé, Raphael Dalleo, Luis Duno-Gottberg, and Clevis Headley, 179–199. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi.
- Guerrero, Ed. 1993. *Framing Blackness: The African American Image in Film*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.
- Guha, Malini. 2015. *From Empire to the World: Migrant London and Paris in the Cinema*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.
- Hall, Stuart. 1989. “Cultural Identity and Diaspora.” *Framework* 36: 222–237.
- Hardoy, Jorge, and David Satterthwaite. 1989. *Squatter Citizen: Life in the Urban Third World*. New York: Earthscan.

- Harris, Keith. 2008. "Boyz, Boyz, Boyz: New Black Cinema and Black Masculinity." In *The Persistence of Whiteness: Race and Contemporary Hollywood Cinema*, edited by Daniel Bernardi, 51–66. London: Routledge.
- Harrison, Nicholas. 2003. *Postcolonial Criticism: History, Theory and the Work of Fiction*. Cambridge: Polity.
- hooks, bell. 1994. *Outlaw Culture: Resisting Representations*. New York: Routledge.
- Howard, David. 2005. *Kingston: A Cultural and Literary History*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.
- Ibbi, Andrew Ali. 2014. "Hollywood, the American Image and the Global Film Industry." *Cinej Cinema Journal* 3 (1): 93–106.
- Jaffe, Rivke. 2012. "Talkin' 'Bout the Ghetto: Popular Culture and Urban Imaginaries of Immobility." *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 36 (4): 674–688.
- James, Erica Moiah. 2016. "Every Nigger Is a Star: Reimagining Blackness from Post-Civil Rights America to the Postindependence Caribbean." *Black Camera* 8 (1): 55–83.
- Knee, Adam, and Charles Musser. 1992. "Documentary Filmmaking, and the African-American Experience." *Film Quarterly* 45 (3): 13–25.
- Kuhn, Annette, and Guy Westwell. 2012. *A Dictionary of Film Studies*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Massood, Paula. 2003. *Black City Cinema: African American Urban Experiences in Film*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.
- Moseley-Wood, Rachel. 2015. "The Other Jamaica: Music and the City in Jamaican Film." *Caribbean Quarterly* 61 (2–3): 24–41.
- Naficy, Hamid. 2001. *An Accented Cinema: Exilic and Diasporic Filmmaking*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Neale, Steve. 2000. *Genre and Hollywood*. London: Routledge.
- Olson, Debbie. 2017. "Boys in Black and the Urban Ghetto Child." In *Black Children in Hollywood Cinema: Cast in Shadow*, 121–158. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Osbourne, Alana. 2018. "Touring Trench Town: Com-modifying Urban Poverty and Violence in Kingston, Jamaica." PhD diss., University of Amsterdam.
- Rodman, George. 2012. *Mass Media and a Changing World: History, Industry, Controversy*. New York: McGraw Hill.
- Rohlehr, Gordon. 1992. *My Strangled City and Other Essays*. Port of Spain: Longman Trinidad.
- Shohat, Ella, and Robert Stam. 1994. *Unthinking Euro-centrism: Multiculturalism and the Media*. London: Routledge.
- Smith, Craig A. 2012/2013. "(de) Constructing Patriarchal Masculinities in Cess Silvera's 'Shottas'." *Journal of West Indian Literature* 21 (1/2): 155–180.
- Stam, Robert. 2003. "Beyond Third Cinema: The Aesthetics of Hybridity." In *Rethinking Third Cinema*, edited by Anthony R. Guneratne and Wimal Dissanayake, 31–48. New York: Routledge.
- Stillman, Dinah Assouline. 2008. "Cinéma Beur Comes into its Own." *Review of Middle East Studies* 42 (1–2): 71–77.
- Strachan, Ian Gregory. 2002. *Paradise and Plantation: Tourism and Culture in the Anglophone Caribbean*. Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press.
- Tarr, Carrie. 2005. *Reframing Difference: Beur and Banlieue Filmmaking in France*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.
- Warner, Keith. 2000. *On Location: Cinema and Film in the Anglophone Caribbean*. London: Macmillan.
- Wawrejko, Diane. 2012. "Daniel Nagrin's Dance Portraits: Choreographing Agency." *Journal for the Anthropological Study of Human Movement* 19 (1). <http://www.jashm.press.illinois.edu/19.1/wawrejko.html>.
- Wayne, Mike. 2001. *Political Film: The Dialectics of Third Cinema*. London: Pluto Press.
- Williams, Victoria. 2017. "African Americans in U.S. Film." In *Race in American Film: Voices and Visions That Shaped a Nation*. Vol. 1: A–F, edited by Daniel Bernardi and Michael Green, 1–18. Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO.
- Wilson, David, and Sean O'Sullivan. 2004. *Images of Incarceration: Representations of Prison in Film and Television Drama*. Winchester: Waterside Press.