“Never Stop Fighting”: Dub Improvisation as Critical Sonic Resistance
Carter Mathes

In his 1972 work, *Ways of Seeing*, Jon Berger opens his text with the idea that “Seeing comes before words.” My essay builds on Berger’s contention with an important turn, in that I am interested in how practices of sonic manipulation emerge from and reflect specific hemispheric lines of late twentieth century black life—in a sense, how hearing comes before and informs our ability to process not simply words, but the entire web of socio-cultural meaning being framed within the structure of a song. By lines, I don’t mean in the sense of linear roots, but rather with an attention to contour and ideas of circulation. The sound I am interested in is dub music, the distinctive roots reggae sub-genre emerging in the late 1960s and defined by its reliance on heavy technological manipulation of and improvisation upon established roots reggae records. These dub “versions” of classic reggae songs and “riddims” offer a distinct sense of circulation that plays upon the materiality of sound in order to suggest—through a phenomenological and experimental sonic architecture (employing echo, reverb, delay, sustain)—ephemeral, inchoate, and embryonic forms of resistance to political order. Dub is a sonic form of revolt that centers experimentation as a critical pronouncement on the political “rationality” of the Jamaican post-independent state. Not unlike the Free Jazz efforts of African American musicians during the Civil Rights and Black Power eras, Dub specialists looked to create new horizons for understanding the power of sound within and exceeding music, in order to suggest different ways of existing within and relating to the socio-political realities that shaped their present.

My essay frames Jamaican Dub music within a continuum of black hemispheric experimentation that moves between the sonic and the political: between creative ideas connected to free improvisation and that later feed into late 1970s and early 1980s Rap music production—and back and forth between points within the post-Civil Rights (United States) and post-independence (Jamaica) eras. In charting these movements, I’m resisting often relied upon comparative frameworks for diaspora studies. I instead focus on lines of interactive influence between innovators in both locations—lines that might be thought of as concentric circles that move between and mutually influence developments within each genre/form. My argument concerns this hemispheric circulation of black innovation and political thought, and how it clearly exceeds national borders, even as it emerges from more discrete local contexts. This idea of emergence reflects transnational, multi-dimensional modes of black political and creative affiliation that are not always neatly tied together, but that nonetheless (or perhaps for this reason) represent viable, if embryonic, forms of critical resistance to racial subjection (as this subjection is articulated both through state governance and through the epistemological foundations of those state projects).

I open by framing my critical perspective on sound and black consciousness by considering Peter Tosh as a certain kind of sonic Rastafari political agent, to think more about how his
use of sound relates to the development of Dub Reggae sonic manipulation/innovation, and how Dub can be heard as a sonic commentary on the historical and political realities of displaced Africans in the Western hemisphere that crucially emerges from a strong grounding in Rastafari thought.

Reading Peter Tosh’s statement that “Peace is the diploma you get in the cemetery” one could understand this as a reflection of Tosh’s status as the “toughest.” While that is probably true to an extent, Tosh in his mystical (he is also known as the mystic man) indirection, is also leveling a critique of and challenge to the philosophical foundations of what he calls, “the colonial shitstem.” Perhaps this maneuver can be reflected upon more through his track “Here Comes the Judge,” a cut where he cuts both violently and as remixer. Tosh opens the track with a brief spoken explanation that his title “… does not mean the judge in … our colonial judiciary shitstem … or imperial judiciary shitstem. I mean the judge of righteousness.” Produced by the legendary Joe Gibbs, the track then builds around the now classic Rastafari anthem, “Satta Massagana,” popularized through the work of the Abyssinians (with the production of Coxson Dodd) in 1971. Against the background of the Rastafari hymn, Tosh declaims the history of Caribbean exploitation and extraction perpetrated by slave traders and colonizers—simultaneously remixing the sonic dimensions of “Satta Massagana” while conceptually doing so in regards to the position of judge and the very terms of justice as they have been crafted in respect to a Western logic of white supremacy.

Tosh thus becomes a touchstone in my argument about the bridging of sonic experimentation and political resistance through the improvisatory nature if Dub. The trajectory of my essay moves from Tosh through the works of Dub producers such as Scientist, Augustus Pablo, King Tubby, and Lee “Scratch” Perry, as I examine moments in different Dub productions that exemplify the convergence of sonic and epistemological remixing. In other words, my examination considers how sound is manipulated in order to reimagine horizons of political, historical, and social existence outside of the constraints of Western rationality and empiricism. Tracing these lines of sonic, improvisatory resistance as central to an African Diasporic tradition of innovation, I draw upon the theoretical work of Nathaniel Mackey, Kamau Brathwaite, Edouard Glissant, David Toop, and Kodwo Eshun. These writers all chart ways of interpreting the phenomenological interplay of the mental, corporeal, and spiritual realms of existence within modalities of creative resistance to racial hegemony.