“Jamaican Funk – Canadian Style”: Diasporic Dialogue and Hybridized
Identity in the Music of Michie Mee

By

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Abstract

Michelle McCullock, professionally known as Michie Mee, is a Canadian hip-hop artist who first came to prominence in Toronto's young hip-hop scene in the mid-1980s. Michie Mee is an important figure in Canadian hip-hop for several reasons. She is a successful female rapper in a highly male-dominated performance sphere. Furthermore, she was the first Canadian rapper to gain acknowledgement and support from established New York hip-hop acts such as Boogie Down Productions (BDP). Michie Mee was also the first Canadian rapper signed to an American record label (First Priority Music). However, what makes her especially unique is her expression of a distinct Jamaican/Canadian hybrid identity. From her earliest recordings "Run For Cover" and "Jamaican Funk: Canadian Style," to 2013's "Bahdgyal Bubble," Michie Mee has promoted a strong Jamaican identity within her lyrical and visual style. By using theories of hybridity and third space, my thesis investigates Michie Mee's articulation of a recognizable hybrid identity that projects both Canadian and Jamaican sensibilities.

Keywords: Canadian hip-hop, Michie Mee, diaspora, hybridity, identity, culture, code-switching, music video, lyrics, rap, dancehall reggae, patois, Jamaica, Toronto, KRS-One.

Résumé

Michelle McCulloch, surtout connue sous son nom de scène Michie Mee, est une artiste hip-hop canadienne qui a percé dans la scène hip-hop émergente de Toronto au milieu des années 80. Michie Mee est une figure importante du hip-hop Canadien pour de multiples raisons : elle est une rappeuse reconnue dans un univers musical fortement dominé par les hommes. Elle était aussi le premier artiste rap canadien à recevoir l'aval et le soutien de groupes de hip-hop new-yorkais reconnus, tels que Boogie Down Productions (BDP). Michie Mee était également le premier artiste rap signé par un studio d'enregistrement américain (First Priority Music). Pourtant, ce qui la rend vraiment unique, c'est surtout son expression d'une identité jamaïcaine et canadienne hybride. Depuis ses premières chansons « Run For Cover » et « Jamaican Funk : Canadian Style » jusqu'à « Bahdgyal Bubble » sorti en 2013, Michie Mee a toujours mis l'accent sur son identité jamaïcaine, à la fois dans ses textes et dans son style visuel. En utilisant les théories de l'hybridité et du troisième espace, nous explorons dans cette thèse l'expression par Michie Mee d'une identité hybride reconnaissable, qui met en avant à la fois les valeurs canadiennes et jamaïcaines.

Mots-clés: Hip-hop canadien, Michie Mee, diaspora, hybridité, identité, culture, inversion des codes, vidéo-clips, paroles, rap, dancehall reggae, patois, Jamaïque, Toronto, KRS-One.

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION, THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK, METHODOLOGY

Introduction

I was 14 when I was formally introduced to hip-hop culture. I had previously been exposed to breakdancing, and I wrote a horrible rap about food in my Grade 8 computing class, but my interest in learning more about hip-hop stopped there. However, in 1986, Run D.M.C.'s *Raising Hell* and the Beastie Boys' *Licensed to Ill* provided a sonic blueprint for what developed into a lifelong appreciation of, and engagement with, hip-hop music and culture and various musical genres of the African diaspora. Hip-hop, as well as the cultural forms that contributed to its development and have been influenced by it, has played a large role in shaping my life's path and my worldview. I have gone from a fan to a participant (as a DJ and performer), and now a contributing scholar to the emerging field of Canadian hip-hop studies.

Canada, like other countries outside the United States, saw a dramatic increase in interest in hip-hop culture and rap recordings soon after its rise in the 1980s. Once confined to the Bronx, the music and culture quickly spread to New York's other boroughs, neighbouring states, and the nation, before crossing international borders. Run D.M.C. and the Beastie Boys made significant headway in breaking both racial barriers and national borders, as rap became a global phenomenon and industry. Like thousands of other young Canadians, I was transfixed by the music's intensity and immediacy, and consider myself fortunate to have witnessed hip-hop's rise and the subsequent development of then-burgeoning Canadian hip-hop talent.

While hip-hop studies in the United States and elsewhere have flourished, the discipline remains relatively quiet in Canada given the quantity and quality of rap recordings our country has produced since the mid-1980s. Pioneering artists such as Michie Mee, Maestro Fresh Wes, Dream Warriors, Dubmatique, and the Rascalz, in addition to the recent recordings of Kardinal

Offishall, Shad, Classified, and Eternia, and the international success of K-Os, K'naan, and multi-platinum selling artist Drake, represent a healthy and vibrant hip-hop culture in Canada – not to mention lesser-known independent acts from across the nation. A recurring theme in numerous hip-hop recordings is the articulation of one's cultural background. Most of the artists mentioned above have presented a hybrid identity in their works (Maestro Fresh Wes – Guyana, Dream Warriors – Pan-Caribbeanism, K'Naan – Somalia, Dubmatique's Disoul – Cameroon, Rascalz' Red One – Jamaica). Thus far, scholars such as Krims¹ and Chamberland² have analyzed Canadian hip-hop from an historical perspective. Marsh³ has explored the ways in which Aboriginal Canadian youth have used rap as a means to express their identities.⁴ Building on these foundational texts, I would like to elaborate further on the history and development of Canadian hip-hop music and culture.

Michie Mee, born Michelle McCulloch, stands as one of Canada's cultural pioneers for her contribution to hip-hop and popular music. Although she is recognized as a trailblazer among Canadian hip-hop aficionados, her work has received scant attention within Canadian hip-hop scholarship. To address this lacuna, my thesis investigates Michie Mee's role as a performer who helped give hip-hop a distinct Canadian identity, albeit one that features strong Jamaican

¹ Adam Krims, *Rap Music and the Poetics of Identity*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

² Roger Chamberland, "Rap in Canada: Bilingual and Multicultural," in *Global Noise: Rap and Hip-Hop Outside the USA*, edited by Tony Mitchell (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2001), 306-325.

³ Charity Marsh, "Bits and Pieces of Truth: Storytelling, Identity, and Hip Hop in Saskatchewan," *Perspectives on Contemporary Aboriginal Music in Canada*, edited by Anna Hoefnagels and Beverley Diamond (Montreal: McGill/Queen's University Press, 2012): 346-371; Charity Marsh, "Don't Call Me Eskimo: The Politics of Hip Hop Culture in Nunavut," *Musicultures: The Canadian Journal for Traditional Music The Canadian Journal for Traditional Music* 36, (2009).

⁴ In addition, Marsh is in the process of co-editing (with Mark V. Campbell) the first anthology of academic writing about hip-hop in Canada.

influences, thereby creating a hybrid identity that projects both Canadian and Jamaican sensibilities. Seeing as Michie Mee is a woman participating in the heavily male-dominated worlds of hip-hop and reggae, it is important to address the far-too-often masculinist and misogynistic lyrics and atmosphere that are common in both genres. Although the primary focus of this thesis is Michie Mee's cultural heritage, I provide numerous examples of ways in which she has resisted some of the strictures that the music industry places on women performers, namely the pressures to adopt sexualized lyrical themes and dress and to perform in an overtly sexualized manner. In addition to her role as Canadian hip-hop ambassador, especially early in her career, her overall success and longevity as a rapper in an ultra-masculine industry make her accomplishments as a Canadian hip-hop pioneer all the more impressive.

The construction and performance of a hybridized cultural/national identity are widespread among Jamaican-Canadians but is less common among first-generation Jamaicans in the United States. Thompson and Bauer investigated how Jamaican immigrants identify (or do not identify) with their new country and discovered that those relocating to the U.S. tend to maintain a straightforward Jamaican identity, rejecting identification as Americans. In contrast, immigrants to Britain and Canada often develop hybridized identities such as "Jamaican-British" and "Jamaican-Canadian."⁵ Michie Mee's overt promotion of a dual cultural identity supports these findings. Rinaldo Walcott comments on the complex relationship that Caribbean migrants have with their new and original homes:

...post-1960s children of migrants have begun to articulate a belonging to Canada that allows for a cultural expressivity that is both uniquely theirs and simultaneously in conversation with a wide array of cultural expressivity of the black diaspora. Therefore, Caribbean popular culture in Canada is lodged between

⁵ Paul Thompson and Elaine Bauer, "Evolving Jamaican Migrant Identities: Contrasts Between Britain, Canada and the USA," *Community, Work & Family* 6, no. 1 (2003): 89-90.

the continuing relations of Canadian proximity to the United States and, simultaneously, an imagined and real relation to the region of the Caribbean constituted through the memories, histories, and desires of largely post-independent Caribbean migrants and their first and second-generation offspring.⁶

By exhibiting Jamaican cultural markers within hip-hop's larger context Michie Mee's music reflects the "cultural expressivity" referred to by Walcott. In Canada, as in other Western nations, transnational networks of cultural memory, ritual, and performance are of particular importance to immigrants who may otherwise feel excluded and marginalized in their new homes. For many Caribbean-Canadians, such activities affirm their sense of belonging and identity.⁷ These elements of Jamaican culture help to collectively re-contextualize who they are in their new home, city, and neighbourhood.

As a Canadian artist performing an art form born from Afrological⁸ musical practices, but largely recognized as African-American, Michie Mee and her music are part of what Walcott describes as "the Caribbean popular culture in Canada." Walcott explains: "music remains one of the most complex and significant expressive cultural forms of the black diaspora," and "on any Canadian rap album it is not unusual for the performer to shift between recognizable African-American derived musical styles and Caribbean-derived styles and sounds."⁹ Michie Mee's unique oeuvre provides a trenchant example of the kind of dual hybrid identity that Walcott

⁶ Rinaldo Walcott, "Caribbean Pop Culture in Canada: Or, the Impossibility of Belonging to the Nation," *Small Axe* 9, no. 5.1 (July 1999), 125.

⁷ Andrea Davis, "Translating Narratives of Masculinity Across Borders: A Jamaican Case Study," *Caribbean Quarterly* 52, no. 2/3 (2006): 25.

⁸ "Afrological" is a term coined by George E. Lewis to describe systems of musical "logic" that have emerged out of African diasporic communities, theorizing them as "historically emergent rather than ethnically essential" (217).

⁹ Walcott, "Caribbean Pop Culture in Canada," 136-137.

describes.

Theoretical Framework: Diaspora, Hybridity, Third Space, and Code-Switching

Approximately one-fifth of Canada's population of 35,000,000 was born outside of its borders. Millions of first- or second-generation Canadians trace their lineage to other places of origin. Therefore, Canada is a land of many cultural diasporas. Robin Cohen, author of *Global Diasporas: An Introduction*, traces the development of diasporic studies to the work of Stuart Hall, James Clifford, and Paul Gilroy, and to the 1991 launch of *Diaspora: a Journal of Transnational Studies*.¹⁰ Cohen suggests that the first edition of *Global Diasporas*, published in 1997, "caught the zeitgeist" of the academic community's interest in diasporic studies and he credits a 1991 essay by William Safran with advancing a definition of "diaspora" that contained somewhat established parameters:¹¹

- 1 they, or their ancestors, have been dispersed from an original 'centre' to two or more foreign regions;
- 2 they retain a collective memory, vision or myth about their original homeland including its location, history, and achievements;
- 3 they believe they are not – and perhaps can never be – fully accepted in their host societies and so remain partly separate;
- 4 their ancestral home is idealized and it is thought that when conditions are favourable, either they or their descendants should return;
- 5 they believe all members of the diaspora should be committed to the maintenance or the original homeland's restoration and to its safety and prosperity;
- 6 they continue in various ways to relate to that homeland and their ethnocommunal consciousness and solidarity are in an important way defined by the existence of such a relationship.

¹⁰ Robin Cohen, *Global Diasporas: An Introduction* (Oxon: Routledge, 2008), xiv.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 6.

On the surface, it can be surmised that numbers 1, 2, and 6 apply to Michie Mee for the following reasons: she moved to Canada at a young age,¹² and was therefore dispersed (albeit by her parents' choice) from an original centre; she articulates a Jamaican identity through various performance strategies, and fellow Jamaican-Canadians identify with her through a shared collective memory of their homeland; and, although Michie Mee expresses a hybrid identity as Jamaican and Canadian, she clearly demonstrates solidarity with her original homeland through her music.

In addition to the parameters outlined by Safran, Cohen suggests that for “groups that disperse for colonial or voluntarist reasons,” diasporas mobilize a collective identity.¹³ Furthermore, Cohen claims that diasporic experiences foster creativity, citing advances in art, medicine, and literature among diasporic Jews as evidence.¹⁴ The Jamaican diaspora has similarly given rise to a wide array of creative expressions, particularly within the field of popular music. Ska, reggae, and dancehall styles that first developed in Jamaica have been fostered in many Jamaican diasporic communities and have gone on to influence modes of music making around the world: the transplantation of Jamaican sound system culture to the South Bronx in the 1970s and its influence on early hip-hop culture is a particularly notable example. Thus, Michie Mee's combination of Jamaican, Canadian, and American musical and cultural signifiers continues an intra-diasporic conversation that had already been taking place for some time.¹⁵

¹² The mid-1970s, a decade that saw a dramatic increase in Jamaicans moving to Canada.

¹³ Cohen, *Global Diasporas*, 6-8.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 7.

¹⁵ Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993), 87.

The concept of “diaspora” has been used extensively to describe Jewish migration; however, since the 1990s, diasporic studies have grown to include the movement of various peoples around the globe. Additionally, the term is now firmly associated with the notion of ‘hybridity’ which “celebrate[s] the transgressive intermixtures and impurities of the so-called third space’.”¹⁶ The “African diaspora,” one of the most studied examples of “diaspora,” refers to the hundreds of millions of people worldwide that identify with Africa as a place of ancestry and origin, even if the level of identification is somewhat distant or abstract.

The concept of diaspora is useful for studying Jamaican immigration to Canada as well. Toronto boasts the second-largest Jamaican population outside of Jamaica. According to the 2006 census, out of 300,000 citizens who identify as Caribbean, 200,000 claim a Jamaican lineage. With the exception of the annual Caribana festival, which celebrates a pan-Caribbean theme, Jamaican culture is the dominant Caribbean culture in Toronto¹⁷ and is quite visible in the city’s everyday environment.¹⁸

Canada was one of several countries that openly received Jamaican immigrants in the mid-20th century (the United Kingdom and the United States being the other primary homes for Jamaican ex-pats). Jamaican emigration to Canada peaked between the years 1975 and 1984 due in large measure to political unrest and economic decline in Jamaica.¹⁹ Burman points out that, “migrants to Canada have overwhelmingly chosen to live in cities, Toronto above all others in

¹⁶ Kim Knott and Seán McLoughlin, “Introduction,” in *Diasporas: Concepts, Intersections, Identities*, edited by Kim Knott and Seán McLoughlin (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 10-11.

¹⁷ Jenny Burman, *Transnational Yearnings: Tourism, Migration, and the Diasporic City* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2010), 15.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 19.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 72.

the case of Jamaicans and other Caribbean migrants.”²⁰ As such, Canada, and Toronto specifically, are important centres of the Jamaican diaspora. At the heart of diasporic studies lies “the concept of the image of a remembered home that stands at a distance both temporally and spatially.”²¹ In this thesis, I examine the performative strategies Michie Mee uses to not only remember, but actively express a Jamaican identity that is interwoven with her identification as a Canadian.

Michie Mee’s work is part of a much larger diasporic flow of Jamaican music and culture around the globe. As Sarah Daynes has pointed out, the transnational spread of reggae was initially due to Jamaican migrants to new countries such as the United Kingdom, where a distinctly British style of reggae emerged amid new record labels, recording studios, and record stores created by and for Jamaican ex-pats.²² Toronto also developed a strong reggae scene as Jamaicans made their way to Canada in unprecedented numbers. Throughout the 1960s and 1970s, clubs and small record labels, in addition to an influx of Jamaican musicians such as Jackie Mittoo, Leroy Sibbles, and Messenjah, helped foster a vibrant reggae scene in Toronto. For many Jamaicans living outside of Jamaica, reggae became one of the main conduits for the maintenance of cultural ties to Jamaica, and with one another. Michie Mee’s construction and performance of a Jamaican-Canadian identity need to be understood against this backdrop of Jamaican diasporic communities and culture within Toronto.

Another concept that is useful for examining the movement or spread of cultural forms is a more nuanced version of transnationalism known as “translocalism.” According to Greiner and

²⁰ Burman, *Transnational Yearnings*, 15.

²¹ Knott and McLoughlin, “Introduction,” 10.

²² Sarah Daynes, *Time and Memory in Reggae Music* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2010), 33.

Sakdapolrak, the term translocality was introduced to allow for a more specific approach that “challenges the regional limitations often implicit in area studies and emphasize that the world is constituted through processes that transgress boundaries on different scales.”²³ Additionally, Oakes and Schein state that translocality is “identified with more than one location.”²⁴ As it pertains to Michie Mee, the rapper identifies with Jamaica and Canada and, more narrowly, with Toronto and even explicit locales within the city. Therefore, translocalism is a useful concept when examining the ways in which she articulates a hybridized identity that references multiple cultural and geographic locations.

In *Diasporas: Concepts, Intersections, Identities*, John Hutnyk describes “hybridity” as a juncture in which a cultural mixture results from “the diasporized meet[ing] the host in a scene of migration.”²⁵ He adds that hybridity is less a fixed position than a process in constant development.²⁶ Historically, “hybridity” has been associated with “syncretism,” a term used to describe the combining of multiple cultural or religious forms. For example, in the Caribbean and South America, Candomblé, Santería, and Vodun resulted from the mixing of African religious practices with those associated with Catholicism. The resulting religions are highly syncretic, featuring diverse rituals, belief systems, and signifiers.²⁷ Similarly, the performance persona of Michie Mee is highly syncretic and thoroughly hybridized, drawing on cultural

²³ Clemens Greiner and Patrick Sakdapolrak, “Translocality: Concepts, Applications and Emerging Research Perspectives,” *Geography Compass* 7, no. 4 (2013): 375.

²⁴ Oakes, T. and Schein, L. *Translocal China linkages, Identities, and the reimaging of space*. London: Routledge, pp. xii–xiii, (2006a).

²⁵ John Hutnyk, “Hybridity,” in *Diasporas: Concepts Intersections, Identities*, edited by Kim Knott, and Seán McLoughlin (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 59.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 60.

²⁷ Jan Nederveen Pieterse, “Globalization as Hybridization,” in *Media and Cultural Studies: Keywords*, edited by Meenakshi Gigi Durham and Douglas M. Kellner (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2006), 668.

signifiers from diverse sources to create what Homi Bhabha, one of the first cultural theorists to discuss hybridity as a cultural process, describes as a “Third Space.” He explains:

the importance of hybridity is not to be able to trace two original moments from which the third emerges, rather hybridity is the ‘third space’ which enables other positions to emerge. This third space displaces the histories that constitute it, and sets up new structures of authority, new political initiatives, which are inadequately understood through received wisdom²⁸

In *The Location of Culture*,²⁹ Bhabha illuminates the third space concept further by claiming that it “constitutes the discursive conditions of enunciation that ensure that the meaning and symbols of culture have no primordial unity or fixity; that even the same signs can be appropriated, translated, rehistoricized and read anew.” In other words, the third space represents not only a cultural sphere made possible by friction between a host nation and newly transplanted peoples, but a constantly evolving process that does not allow for “pure” or static national identities.

Stuart Hall³⁰ and Avtar Brah³¹ also claim that identity as a ‘production’ is always in process and never complete. The work of Bhabha, Hall and Brah suggests that the third space is a physical and temporal location within and through which new identities are made possible. Third space is situated in juxtaposition with the host nation’s dominant culture; the “diasporized” construct hybridized identities through the differences between the host culture and their own. Of this relationship, Burman states:

The affective connection to origin cannot be presumed a priori: it is only perceptible at the moment of the agent’s enunciation of such a connection, in the diasporic dwelling

²⁸ Jonathan Rutherford, “The Third Space. Interview With Homi Bhabha,” in *Identity: Community, Culture, Difference* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1990), 211.

²⁹ Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994), 55.

³⁰ Stuart Hall, “Cultural Identity and Diaspora,” in *Identity: Community, Culture, Difference*, 222.

³¹ Avtar Brah, *Cartographies of Diaspora: Contesting Identities* (London: Routledge, 1996), 97.

place... we can consider only the expression of a connection, not the thing-in-itself, and that expression is shaped by a dialogue with the new environment.³²

In other words, the expression of a hybrid identity is possible through identification with cultural signifiers of one's homeland, that stand in juxtaposition—or at play—with the cultural signifiers of the host nation.

Burman classifies Toronto as a “diasporic city,” and states that the “emotional, financial, and historical links to other places have a profound impact on the usages of the city and on the practices by which residents move toward translating the city into a place of *between-ness*” (italics in original).³³ The “between-ness” that Burman refers to echoes Homi Bhabha's concept of third space. Toronto is a large city in which first-, second- and third-generation Canadians—and their respective cultural backgrounds—mix, mingle, and overlap with one another. As Gilroy reminds us, “culture is not a fixed and impermeable feature of social relations; its forms change, develop, and combine and are dispersed in historical processes,”³⁴ Michie Mee's articulation of Jamaican and Canadian identities does not fall along an easy-to-map binary. Instead, they are products of the artist's *personal* representations of Jamaican cultural signifiers and memories, along with her experience as a Canadian in a multicultural and diasporic city such as Toronto.

Brah argues that diasporic space, within a multicultural city such as Toronto, is also inhabited by people who are constructed as “local” – they too navigate the same space and are subject to the cultural signifiers demonstrated by the “diasporized.”³⁵ Brah's theory supports Burman's concept of multiple identities at play with one another within a city or diasporic space.

³² Burman, *Transnational Yearnings*, 79.

³³ Ibid., 82.

³⁴ Paul Gilroy, *There Ain't No Black in the Union Jack: The Cultural Politics of Race and Nation*, (London: Routledge, 1987), 217.

³⁵ Brah, *Cartographies of Diaspora*, 181.

Brah further describes diaspora as a “lived experience within a locality... mediated historically by the specific everyday of social relations.”³⁶ In her performance practice, Michie Mee articulates Jamaican culture through linguistic, sartorial, and sonic signifiers of dancehall reggae. These signifiers are juxtaposed with markers of Canadian and North American musical and cultural identities; for example, she often switches between rapping with and without a Jamaican accent and mentions both Jamaican and Toronto locales in her lyrics, articulating a distinct hybrid identity in her music.

A unique feature found in Michie Mee’s work, dating back to her earliest recordings, is her ability to switch comfortably from Canadian English to Jamaican patois. It is a well-honed skill that she is known for and, according to Toronto hip-hop industry veteran Ron Nelson, something very few know how to do well.³⁷ In linguistic terms, “code-switching” refers to “the alternative use by bilinguals of two or more languages in the same conversation... switching sometimes occurs between the turns of different speakers in the conversation, sometimes within a single turn, and sometimes even within a single utterance.”³⁸ Of interest in this definition is the word “bilinguals,” as Jamaican patois is technically a form of the English language, however, to the non-native speaker, may be difficult to understand as though it is an entirely different tongue.

Although the idea of code-switching has been primarily applied to language,³⁹ the concept can provide insight into other modes of creative expression that similarly combine two

³⁶ Brah, *Cartographies of Diaspora*, 192.

³⁷ Ron Nelson, interview by author, Toronto, January 13, 2015.

³⁸ Lesley Milroy and Pieter Muysken, “Introduction: Code-Switching and Bilingualism Research,” in *One Speaker, Two Languages: Cross-Disciplinary Perspectives on Code-Switching*, edited by Lesley Milroy and Pieter Muskeyn (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 7.

³⁹ Eirlys E. Davies, and Abdelali Bentahila, “Code Switching and the Globalisation of Popular Music: The Case of North African Rai and Rap,” *Multilingua* 25, no.4 (2006): 367.

or more codes to create an example of “border-transcending identity formation.”⁴⁰ In most interviews, Michie Mee speaks without a Jamaican accent. Code-switching occurs within her music and videos wherein it becomes a crucial element of how she performs a hybrid identity. Davies and Bentahila hypothesize that code-switching within lyrics performs two, yet opposite, functions. First, it may be used to directly target an audience. Using codified words, accents, or gestures serves the purpose of aligning the singer with a desired audience.⁴¹ In Michie Mee’s case, that would be the Jamaican communities in Toronto, Jamaica, and beyond. Secondly, code-switching may function as a means of opening up a text to a broader audience.⁴² For example, midway through “On this Mic,” Michie Mee breaks into Jamaican patois for 18 bars while the underlying groove switches to a dancehall reggae “riddim.” The instrumental is abrupt, yet clear to the listener, and complements her reggae-style vocals in a manner that underscores her projected dual identity. While this example may work to align Michie Mee with a specific audience, it also attracts the audience to her music due to the distinct reggae influence. Perhaps without this 18-bar patois and dancehall rhythm change-up, reggae fans may not be attracted to the music. It is important to note that there is little overlap between Toronto’s hip-hop and reggae scenes.⁴³ Therefore, inserting patois in “On this Mic” serves to attract a wider audience (reggae fans and the Jamaican community) to Michie Mee’s music by appealing to them with codified lyrics that offer insider status to those that relate to them. As a result, Michie Mee appeals to both hip-hop and reggae audiences.

⁴⁰ Mela Sarker, Lise Winer, and Kobir Sarker, “Multilingual Code-Switching in Montreal Hip-hop: Mayhem Meets Method, or “Tout Mouné Qui Talk Trash Kiss Mon Black Ass Du Nord,” *Proceedings of the 4th International Symposium on Bilingualism*, edited by James Cohen et al. (Somerville, MA: Cascadia Press, 2005), 2060.

⁴¹ Davies and Bentahila, “Code Switching,” 390.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Ron Nelson, interview by author, Toronto, January 13, 2015.

Hip-hop's roots may be firmly planted in the South Bronx, but through its music, storytelling narratives, and polyrhythms, its lineage can be traced to Jamaica, Puerto Rico, Cuba, the southern United States, and West Africa. The bricolage nature of the music and the culture and its propensity to borrow and blend is part of its global appeal. Hip-hop artists and practitioners around the world are known to infuse native dialects and languages, local musical samples and dance steps into their performances, whether they are MCs, DJs, dancers, or graffiti artists. It is fitting that a culture that relies on borrowing, reinterpretation, and acculturation, would be solid ground for linguistic diversity. In separate studies on rap music outside the United States, rappers in Japan⁴⁴ and Germany⁴⁵ were found to use African-American Language (AAL) as a means of constructing an "authentic" hip-hop identity. Performers from both nations combined AAL with local vernacular in order to "be aligned with some quality, some things, some places, or some ideas, thus using words known to be associated with them."⁴⁶ In other words, strategic use of specific words and language within African-American culture (and hip-hop specifically) reflects the desire of many international hip-hop artists to look and sound like their American counterparts. In contrast, Michie Mee does not appear to fall into this category for several reasons. She performs a high proportion of her vocals in what I refer to as "Canadian English." There is no clear attempt to affect her voice to sound American. In addition, as a Jamaican immigrant, her patois comes off as genuine, and not contrived, therefore separating her from many of her international counterparts. Michie Mee's code-switching appears to be less

⁴⁴ Ian Condry, "A History of Japanese Hip-Hop: Street Dance, Club Scene, Pop Market," in *Global Noise: Rap and Hip-Hop Outside the USA*, edited by Tony Mitchell (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2001), 232.

⁴⁵ Elaine Richardson, "African American Language in Online German Hip-Hop," in *Code-Meshing as World English: Pedagogy, Policy, Performance*, edited by Vershawn Ashanti Young and Aja Y. Martinez (Urbana, IL: National Council of Teachers of English, 2011), 232.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

based on convincing her audience of her “street credentials,” but rather a sincere articulation of her Canadian and Jamaican identities.

Methodology

In order to examine the ways in which Michie Mee has articulated a hybridized, translocal identity, I implemented a close reading and analysis of specific audio recordings and videos, as well as transcribing interviews conducted with Michie Mee that are available online, as well as a panel in which she participated entitled “Performing Diaspora 2013 Hip Hop Practitioners” that took place at York University in 2013. The interviews and panel were extremely valuable insofar as Michie Mee provided detailed biographical information as well as numerous examples of how she directs (or is suggested to direct) her “performed identity” in her music. I chose the musical and video selections based, in part, on the degree to which they express a hybridized national and cultural identity, and on chronology in order to give a sense of how her performance practice and identity politics have changed throughout her career. Beginning in 1987, her early releases such as “Run For Cover,” “Elements of Style,” “Victory is Calling,” and “On This Mic,” showcase her desire to present a distinct Jamaican identity that runs parallel with her reputation as a respected battle rapper, which was relatively unique in that era. 1991’s *Jamaican Funk – Canadian Style*, via the album’s title track and other examples, continues her presentation of dual cultural sensibilities, but increases the Jamaican content by way of strong reggae influences. The video for “Jamaican Funk – Canadian Style” provides rich examples of Jamaican cultural signifiers. In chapter 6, I turn to recordings that Michie Mee released in the mid-1990s with the band Raggadeath and then to music and videos she released in 1999-2000 that are characterized by the removal of Jamaican cultural identifiers, likely in

response to pressures from the recording industry at the time. Finally, in chapter 7, I examine 2013's "Bahdgyal Bubble," a song and video that signal a return to Michie Mee's prior articulation of a hybridized identity, through performative strategies and signifiers associated with dancehall reggae.

First, I will provide some context for her work by discussing the history of Jamaicans in Canada, more specifically Toronto, in addition to examining the idea of "Jamaican culture" and some of the ways in which performative strategies associated with dancehall reggae have been used to construct and perform a Jamaican identity.

CHAPTER 2: JAMAICANS IN CANADA AND JAMAICAN MUSIC/CULTURE

Toronto claims a population of over 230,000 Jamaican immigrants, or descendants of Jamaican immigrants, making it one of the most populous Jamaican communities in the world.⁴⁷ Contrary to popular thought, Jamaican migrants originally arrived in present-day Canada as early as 1796 when roughly 550 Maroons, a rebel group of Jamaican slaves that had experienced ongoing battles with the British dating back to 1665, were exiled to present-day Nova Scotia.⁴⁸ Upon landing, the approximately 550 Maroons were not the first Blacks to arrive. In 1606, a Black man by the name of Matthew Da Costa arrived in Nova Scotia alongside explorer Pierre Du Gua Monts.⁴⁹ At the start of the American Revolution in 1776, approximately 500 Black slaves were living in Nova Scotia, a number that tripled when White Loyalists, who supported the British during the American Revolution, fled to Atlantic Canada and brought their slaves with them.⁵⁰ By the time the Maroons arrived in 1796, former slaves had travelled back across the Atlantic to West Africa under an agreement by the Sierra Leone Company to assist and develop a new colony.⁵¹ The Maroons, similar to other Blacks in Nova Scotia, suffered from discrimination from the white population. They settled, as did earlier Blacks, on the outskirts of

⁴⁷ Colin Lindsay, *The Jamaican Community in Canada, 2001* (Ottawa: Statistics Canada, 2007), 2.

⁴⁸ Joseph Mensah, *Black Canadians: History, Experiences, Social Conditions* (Halifax, NS: Fernwood Publishing, 2002), 48.

⁴⁹ John Boyko, *Last Steps to Freedom: The Evolution of Canadian Racism* (Toronto: J. Gordon Shillingford, 1998), 158.

⁵⁰ Donald H. Clairmont and Dennis William Magill, *Africville: The Life and Death of a Canadian Black Community*, 3rd ed, (Toronto: Canadian Scholars' Press, 1999), 26.

⁵¹ Mensah, *Black Canadians*, 47.

Halifax, and were enlisted to help build the Halifax Citadel⁵² as well as help defend the British colony from a possible French invasion.⁵³ The Maroons, deeply unsatisfied with their new surroundings, and defiant to British rule (as they had been in Jamaica) decided to leave for Sierra Leone, just as those who had left eight years earlier.⁵⁴

The Maroons were the most significant Jamaican community in Canada until the 20th century. The 19th century saw few Jamaicans arrive, a consequence of policy developments that restricted most persons of African descent from entering the country.⁵⁵ In 1910, Canada initiated immigration legislation that began a selective process based on race.⁵⁶ For this reason, less than 3000 Blacks settled in Canada throughout the first half of the 20th century.⁵⁷ Things started to change for Jamaican immigrants wanting to come to Canada in 1955 with the establishment of the West Indian Domestic Scheme, which allowed nurses, teachers, secretaries, and clerks to immigrate to Canada in small numbers. Also, and perhaps more importantly, the United Kingdom allowed its colonial subjects easy access through its borders. Gradually, more inclusive immigration laws saw an increase in non-White immigrants, including those from Jamaica, and other islands in the Caribbean. Early progress in this regard began with the Negro Citizenship Association (NCA), founded by Jamaican immigrants Harry Gairey and Bromley L. Armstrong,

⁵² Barrington Walker, "Jamaicans and the Making of Modern Canada" in *Jamaica in the Canadian Experience: A Multiculturalizing Presence*, edited by Carl E. James and Andrea Davis (Halifax, NS: Fernwood Publishing, 2012), 25.

⁵³ Mensah, *Black Canadians*, 48.

⁵⁴ Walker, "Jamaicans and the Making of Modern Canada," 25.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 27.

⁵⁶ Michele A. Johnson, "'To Ensure That Only Suitable Persons are Present': Screening Jamaican Women for the West Indian Scheme," in *Jamaica in the Canadian Experience*, 40.

⁵⁷ Walker, "Jamaicans and the Making of Modern Canada," 27.

with Barbados-born Don Moore and his wife Kay, and Stanley Grizzle, who was born in Canada to Jamaica immigrants.⁵⁸ One of the group's primary successes took place in 1952, when they opposed the arbitrary immigrant selection process, that more often than not refused entry to non-Whites in order to help a Jamaican nurse enter Canada on the basis of "exceptional merit." Increasing numbers of nurses from Jamaica and the Caribbean began to emigrate based on this precedent.⁵⁹ Meanwhile, due to high unemployment rates, the Jamaican government promoted emigration to Canada for the following reasons: the Jamaican government hoped that their citizens would get work abroad when there were few opportunities at home; and, Jamaicans who left the island for Canada, the United States, or the United Kingdom would send back earnings to family and loved ones.⁶⁰

Also in 1955, the Peoples National Party leader Norman Manley, who later became Premier of Jamaica in 1962, met with the NCA in Toronto to pressure Canada to open its doors to Jamaica and other Caribbean nations.⁶¹ It was at this time that Great Britain, where numerous Jamaicans were encouraged to relocate "through official recruitment policies in the West Indies,"⁶² had tightened their immigration policies. The British Commonwealth welcomed its subjects primarily to take up menial labour tasks that the white British population largely did not want.⁶³ Canada and the United States imposed looser immigration policies resulting in a greater

⁵⁸ Walker, "Jamaicans and the Making of Modern Canada," 27.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 30-31.

⁶⁰ Johnson, "'To Ensure That Only Suitable Persons are Present'," 41.

⁶¹ Walker, "Jamaicans and the Making of Modern Canada," 27.

⁶² Paul Thompson and Elaine Bauer, "Evolving Jamaican Migrant Identities," 93.

⁶³ Frances Henry, *The Caribbean Diaspora in Toronto: Learning to Live With Racism* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1994), 18.

influx of Jamaicans to these nations instead of Great Britain.⁶⁴ In addition to the promise of jobs, numerous Jamaicans left their homeland to escape political violence and uncertain economic conditions back at home. In 1962, Canadian Minister of Immigration Ellen Fairclough amended the Immigration Act to eradicate official racist immigration policies, and in 1967 a points system was introduced based on education, training, occupational skills, and other criteria. This led to an unprecedented wave of Jamaican immigration to Canada between the years 1973-77.

Between 3000 and 11000 Jamaicans arrived in Canada each year in the 1970s, and between 3000 and 5500 per year in the 1980s.⁶⁵ For multiple reasons, it is hard to determine the exact number of Jamaican-Canadians in Canada: official records occasionally list Jamaicans as “British,” and many Jamaican immigrants have bypassed full citizenship requirements. However, it is estimated that nearly one-quarter of a million people of Jamaican ancestry live in the Greater Toronto Area, accounting for seventy-one percent of Canada’s Jamaican-Canadian community. This high percentage is germane to Michie Mee’s career: had she immigrated to a part of Canada that did not have a high concentration of Jamaicans, her performance practice and persona might not have been informed by Jamaican culture to such an extent. But what is “Jamaican culture”?

What is “Jamaican Culture”?

Jamaican culture is complex, non-monolithic, and encompasses a wide variety of practices. For Raymond Williams, “culture” is divided into two interrelated groups: a way of life;

⁶⁴ Thompson and Bauer, “Evolving Jamaican Migrant Identities,” 90.

⁶⁵ Thomas-Hope, 1992.

and, the “forms of signification that circulate within a society.”⁶⁶ These two elements of culture are constantly in flux.⁶⁷ Michie Mee’s career provides a case in point: her performances, songs, and music videos transmit her interpretation of Canadian and/or Jamaican “culture” in varying degrees. Some songs feature patois while others do not. At times her personal style, on stage and in her music videos, includes dancehall-inspired fashion. At others, she is dressed in the “standard hip-hop apparel” of athletic footwear, t-shirt, and brand name sunglasses.

Williams notes that culture is deeply connected to nationalism, even if the “nation is distinct from the nationalist images peddled by governments and media moguls.”⁶⁸ This point is crucial to analysing Michie Mee’s creative output and her articulation of a hybrid Jamaican/Canadian identity: the Jamaican elements of her identity owe more to the Jamaican grassroots musical genre of “dancehall culture” than they do to the country’s officially sanctioned national narratives. Dancehall isn’t just a musical genre. It is also a “space, attitude, fashion, dance, life/style, economic tool, institution, stage, social mirror, ritual, social movement, profile, profession, brand name, community, and tool of articulation.”⁶⁹ In order to understand dancehall culture and the ways in which it informs—and is represented in—Michie Mee’s work, a brief history of reggae music and dancehall culture is necessary.

⁶⁶ Robin Blackburn, introduction to “Culture is Ordinary,” in *Resources of Hope: Culture, Democracy, Socialism* by Raymond Williams (London: Verso Books, 1989), 91.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ Sonjah Stanley Niaah, “Making Space. Kingston’s Dancehall Culture and Its Philosophy of ‘Boundarylessness,’” *African Identities* 2, no.2 (2004), 117.

A Brief Overview of Reggae

Jamaican popular music is rooted in “sound systems,” mobile DJ crews that serviced Kingston and other Jamaican cities beginning in the 1950s. The initial success of sound systems led by entrepreneurs such as Clement Dodd and Dickie Wong had a three-pronged effect: the Jamaican recording industry came to revolve around the pressing of 7” singles for the sound systems to play; there was a large influx of singers within the local scene; and there was a growing emphasis on sound and recording equipment, thus putting the selector, engineer, or producer in a central role that would facilitate the development of the studio-based sub-genres of dub and dancehall.⁷⁰

Jamaican sound systems initially played rhythm & blues, and rock and roll records imported from the United States. According to Chude-Sokei, migrant sugarcane workers travelling to Miami for short periods of labour would occasionally return with the latest rhythm and blues hits on 7” vinyl.⁷¹ Although these imports dominated the sound systems’ early playlists, a unique Jamaican musical genre called ska appeared in the late 1950s. Ska was characterized by “raucous horns, driving shuffle drums, and a thumping bass.”⁷² Other characteristics of ska include an “after-beat” syncopation played on guitar and a stressing of the second and fourth beat over a walking quarter-note bass.⁷³ Performers such as Prince Buster presented his vocals in a manner close to talking, similar to the sound system deejays. By 1966, ska developed into a slower genre known as “rocksteady,” which emphasized guitar strums on

⁷⁰ Daynes, *Time and Memory in Reggae Music*, 30.

⁷¹ Louis Chude-Sokei, “Post-Nationalist Geographies: Rasta, Ragga, and Reinventing Africa” *African Arts* 27, no. 4 (Autumn 1994), 96.

⁷² Dick Hebdige, *Cut ‘N’ Mix* (London: Comedia, 1987), 66.

⁷³ Nidel, *World Music*, 282.

the second and fourth beats while the bass plays on the first and third beats. Drums are generally less pronounced in rocksteady as the bass takes its place.⁷⁴ By the late 1960s, rocksteady developed into reggae, which was characterized by slower tempos, more complex basslines and intricate drum patterns.

Reggae “created a style with complex, neo-African-inspired drumming with a moral outlook influenced by the indigenous Jamaican Rastafarian movement.”⁷⁵ Symbolically, reggae was a music of “social transformation nationally, regionally, and internationally.”⁷⁶ Bob Marley, reggae’s biggest star, became known globally and is the genre’s most recognizable personality to this day. The genre became “a medium of social commentary”⁷⁷ with a political edge, both lyrically, and spiritually, in the form of Rastafarian ideology. When Jamaica claimed independence in 1962, the Rastafarian movement was the voice of Jamaica’s increasingly lower class. Rex M. Nettleford suggests that reggae lyrics contained “the raw stuff of protest coming from the ‘subordinate culture section’ of Jamaican society.”⁷⁸ The music was both musically buoyant and socially critical and, at times, revolutionary.

While ska, rocksteady, and reggae developed as distinct Jamaican musical styles, the braggadocious “talking” vocal techniques reminiscent of sound system deejays⁷⁹ would continue on record in the form of “dubs.” As Manuel and Marshall emphasize, the sound system’s

⁷⁴ Nidel, *World Music*, 282.

⁷⁵ David Brackett, *The Pop, Rock, and Soul Reader: Histories and Debates 3rd edition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 323.

⁷⁶ Carolyn Cooper, *Sound Clash: Jamaican Culture at Large* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2004), 55.

⁷⁷ Leonard E. Barrett, *The Rastafarians* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1997), vii.

⁷⁸ Nettleford, *Caribbean Cultural Identity*, 18.

⁷⁹ In hip-hop culture, “DJ” refers to the turntable operator. To avoid confusion, I will use the alternate spelling “deejay” when referring to reggae sound system vocalists.

centrality in Jamaican popular music and culture meant that deejays would continue to play a defining role in the future of reggae:

from the early sound-system days, the DJ might shout at various points into the mic while playing a song, encouraging dancers and ‘bigging up’ himself and the system; in the 1960s, as these interjections – as rendered over instrumental recordings – became stylized and valued in themselves, the art of the DJ, and the practice of voicing over riddims, became established.⁸⁰

Crucial to the present study, voicing over “riddims” is the foundation of both rap music and dancehall reggae.⁸¹

Dancehall Reggae

Dancehall is heavily rooted in the performance aesthetics of sound system deejays, and is recognized as the latest incarnation of reggae from the early 1980s up to the present. Dancehall reggae is part of the “continuum of Jamaican popular music... largely consumed in dance halls.”⁸² While the “roots” sound of Bob Marley continue to dominate popular understandings of reggae around the world, dancehall has been the popular choice for most Jamaicans over the past few decades. According to Sonjah Stanley Niaah, dancehall (like rocksteady and reggae before it), “occupies marginal spaces and is central to national identity. Dancehall culture is mainstream not only because its spatial centre is Jamaica’s capital city, but because of the pervasiveness of

⁸⁰ Manuel and Marshall, “The Rhythm Method,” 449.

⁸¹ Dick Hebdige, *Cut ‘N’ Mix* (London: Comedia, 1987); Tricia Rose, *Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America* (Hanover, NH: Wesleyan University Press, 1994); Jeff Chang, *Can’t Stop Won’t Stop: A History of the Hip-Hop Generation* (New York: Picador, 2005).

⁸² Sonjah Stanley Niaah, *Dancehall: From Slave Ship to Ghetto*. (Ottawa: University of Ottawa Press, 2010), 4.

its tempo and rhythm, whether displayed in an ordinary television advertisement or its music.”⁸³ Dancehall has continued reggae’s legacy as a major Jamaican cultural signifier throughout the Jamaican diaspora and, indeed, around the world.

Beginning in the late 1960s and up into the present, reggae artists commonly perform over pre-existing tracks called “riddims” which initially were instrumental versions on the B-side of reggae 45s. In the 1980s, producers began to create cover versions of classic 1960s reggae records by the decade’s most popular and prolific producers, most notably Coxsone Dodd of Studio One, and Duke Reid of Treasure Island studio.⁸⁴ Studio One creations such as Alton Ellis’s “Mad Mad,” and Sound Dimension’s “Full Up,” and “Real Rock” have been recycled innumerable times,⁸⁵ thus creating a canon of riddims that are popular to this day. A major difference in the dancehall version is the greater repetition, typically four-bar ostinatos, rather than instrumental versions of fully realized songs. Perhaps more importantly, two rhythm patterns emerged that dominate the musical landscape of dancehall to this day. With the help of TUBS (Time Unit Box System), these drum patterns are outlined below:

	1				2					3					4				
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16			
kick drum	x			x					x			x							
snare drum						x									x				
hi-hat	x		x		x		x		x		x		x		x		x		

Figure 2.1 “The quintessential dancehall riddim.” ⁸⁶

⁸³ Stanley Niaah, *Dancehall*, 16.

⁸⁴ Manuel and Marshall, “The Riddim Method,” 451.

⁸⁵ Ibid.

⁸⁶ Ibid., 457.

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16
kick drum	x				x				x				x			
snare drum				x			x					x			x	
hi-hat	x		x		x		x		x		x		x		x	

Figure 2.2 “The default dancehall drum pattern of the late 1980s and early 1990s.”⁸⁷

While many of Michie Mee’s songs feature traditional sounding hip-hop tracks—with rhythmic emphasis placed on “the one,” or the first beat of each bar, and a snare drum backbeat landing on the second and fourth beats—other recordings feature adaptations of the above dancehall drum patterns. Occasionally, the dancehall drum patterns appear on a track in which Michie Mee raps in Canadian English but switches to patois mid-song as if to match the underlying rhythm. Examples of songs in which Michie Mee mixes and matches rapping, patois, hip-hop beats, and dancehall rhythms include “Elements of Style” (1987), “On This Mic” (1988), and “Jamaican Funk” (1991), each of which will be discussed in greater detail in subsequent chapters.

Julian Henriques, author of *Sonic Bodies: Reggae Sound Systems, Performance Techniques and Ways of Knowing*, identifies numerous strategies employed by reggae deejays that are part of “an oral tradition, in which their improvised performance embodies a living archive of techniques... with the aim of guiding the crowd through the procession of the event.”⁸⁸ These strategies, which he classifies as “voicing,” include but are not limited to: excitement, control, and guidance; riding the riddim; conducting; tracing; commanding; championing; call and response; freestyling (improvisational method of ‘toasting’ over the

⁸⁷ Manuel and Marshall, “The Riddim Method,” 457.

⁸⁸ Julian Henriques, *Sonic Bodies: Reggae Sound Systems, Performance Techniques and Ways of Knowing* (New York, NY: Continuum, 2011), 175.

rhythm); vocal battles against rival deejays; the use of preacher-like vocals influenced by the Jamaican church; and prosody, which Henriques defines as a voice's "timbre, intonation, texture, and auditory character,"⁸⁹ each of which can be altered depending on the situation. These strategies are honed over time to the point that they can be utilized at opportune moments during a performance to heighten the audience's emotional response and overall enjoyment. According to Henriques, "voicing mixes and mingles together meaning and feeling, intimacy and power, spirit and matter, and indeed speaker and listener"⁹⁰ contributing to the audience's overall enjoyment.

Many of the techniques that Henriques identifies translate to rap recordings and live performances, perhaps not surprisingly given the fact that hip-hop adopted many facets of Jamaican sound system culture. Or, as Cooper elucidates, "reggae itself did not cross over widely into Black American culture in the 1970s, but its sound system mode of transmission did."⁹¹ Therefore, an artist such as Michie Mee, who clearly incorporates both dancehall reggae and hip-hop in her performance practice, provides a particularly rich case study for an examination of the interrelationships between hip-hop and dancehall reggae.

Reggae/Dancehall as Oppositional Space

Although Jamaica's national motto is, "Out of Many, One People," dancehall reggae largely represents the nation's social underclass through its argot (Jamaican patois), fashion, and lyrical themes. Often, these signifiers stand in opposition to the nation's officially mandated

⁸⁹ Henriques, *Sonic Bodies*, 200.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 175.

⁹¹ Cooper, *Sound Clash*, 241.

narratives. In order to better understand the oppositional characteristics of dancehall reggae and how they apply to Michie Mee, I will discuss them in detail.

In *Caribbean Cultural Identity: The Case of Jamaica*, Rex Nettleford suggests that Jamaica's national motto is largely an "ideological façade [that] covers up the social injustices of induced poverty among the black masses and the continuance of the entrenched privileges of the Eurocentric few."⁹² He suggests that "Out of Many, One People," may not be the best description of a nation that, contrary to popular thought, is culturally pluralist, and has its fair share of economic discrepancies among its social classes.⁹³ The motto strategically paints over the country's history of racial and economic inequalities to propagate the impression of a harmonious population to prospective visitors or investors. Mark V. Campbell emphasizes Jamaica's diversity, noting that "from Rastafari to Seventh Day Adventists to Maroon rural culture, Jamaica is vastly more diverse than television and newspapers lead us to believe."⁹⁴

In *Time and Memory in Reggae Music*, Sarah Daynes claims that reggae contains a distinct rebellious nature that can be traced back to its origins. At its heart is "recognition of a history of struggle, against slavery, segregation, and colonization."⁹⁵ Daynes suggests that reggae has a "historical memory" that transcends Jamaica's borders to encompass the African diaspora. In so doing, dancehall reggae has the capacity to achieve three goals: "to reveal a history of resistance considered as having been underestimated as well as hidden by Europeans; to restore

⁹² Nettleford, *Caribbean Cultural Identity*, 5.

⁹³ World Magazine Jamaica, "Blood and Fire," posted October 18, 2013, accessed March 1, 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZO5ITRMg-Js>.

⁹⁴ Mark V. Campbell, "The Gwannings," in *Jamaica in the Canadian Experience*, 121-122.

⁹⁵ Daynes, *Time and Memory in Reggae Music*, 167.

dignity by showing the resistance started with the first captured slave; and, to transmit this history of resistance, in particular to generations to come.”⁹⁶

Political messages became commonplace in reggae in the late 1960s when artists including Bob Marley and Peter Tosh began including Rastafarian ideologies within their lyrics.⁹⁷ In addition to the lyrics, “the essential character of the music... owes much to its genesis and continuing reproduction in the Jamaican imaginary, shaped by culture-specific socio-political and economic realities, including racism, anticolonialism, and Black nationalism.”⁹⁸ Rastafarian fashion, particularly dreadlocks, also played a role in opposing the dominant ideology by showing an alternative cultural aesthetic.⁹⁹ Aside from the lyrical content and fashion, sound systems, which are extremely popular among the general public and the “sufferahs” (lower class Jamaicans), provided entertainment that shunned ideals presented in Jamaican mainstream media. The Jamaican Broadcasting Corporation (JBC) radio network, for instance, did not play reggae.

Adding to roots reggae’s oppositional status in Jamaica was the “rude-bwoi” (rude boy) culture of Kingston. As depicted in the film *The Harder They Come* starring Jimmy Cliff, “rude-bwois” were stylish, yet rugged, young men that dabbled in petty crime. Hebdige describes them as “part of the sound system scene even in the early 1960s... and throughout 1967 the Jamaican charts were filled with rude boy songs.”¹⁰⁰ Not only were reggae’s lyrics anti-establishment, so

⁹⁶ Daynes, *Time and Memory in Reggae Music*, 167.

⁹⁷ Nettleford, *Caribbean Cultural Identity*, 98-99.

⁹⁸ Cooper, *Sound Clash*, 46.

⁹⁹ Bibi Bakare-Yusuf, “Fabricating Identities: Survival and the Imagination in Jamaican Dancehall Culture,” *Fashion Theory* 10, no.3 (2006), 3.

¹⁰⁰ Hebdige, *Cut ‘N’ Mix*, 73.

was a large part of its audience. Obika Gray uses the term “badness-honour” to describe the attitude of the rude boys, which comprises of facial gestures, bodily poses, and a generally defiant disposition.¹⁰¹ In Cooper’s words, rude boy culture struck “a theatrical pose that has been refined in the complicated socialization process of Jamaican youths who learn to imitate and adapt the sartorial and ideological ‘style’ of the heroes and villains of imported movies.”¹⁰² Here lies another point of intersection between dancehall and hip-hop, namely the shared emphasis on “badness-honour.” For a hip-hop artist to incorporate signifiers of dancehall reggae into her identity is to make a political statement: the message is one of defiance, of going against a system that wishes dancehall/reggae remain on the margins.

A range of sonic signifiers have been equally important in articulating reggae and dancehall’s oppositional politics. Unlike their Jamaican Broadcasting Corporation radio deejay counterparts (who have tended to speak “standard English”), dancehall deejays almost always use Jamaican patois—the dialect of the lower classes—in performance and on record. Furthermore, dancehall events are often very loud (20,000 watts is not uncommon),¹⁰³ further enhancing (and announcing) the music’s oppositional nature.

Along with being a source of entertainment, sound systems offer economic livelihood for the audio engineers that build and maintain the massive speakers, vendors, record producers, and others outside the event’s immediacy. Significantly, Henriques suggests that the dancehall, a “creation of the street,” in basic Marxist terms, is a proletarian product:

¹⁰¹ Obika Gray, *Demeaned But Empowered: The Social Power of the Urban Poor in Jamaica*, (Mona, Jamaica: University of West Indies Press, 2004), 129-30.

¹⁰² Cooper, *Sound Clash*, 147.

¹⁰³ Henriques, *Sonic Bodies*, 12.

It is working class – vulgar, subaltern, *lumpen*, given the levels of unemployment – and marginal, given its involvement in the black or grey economies and criminal activities... the poor downtown Kingston areas and other ghetto communities consider themselves to be largely isolated and excluded from mainstream civil society... [with] only minimal access to economic and educational opportunities.¹⁰⁴

Parallels can certainly be drawn between dancehall and hip-hop in this regard, and to other musical genres born out of marginalized communities. However, hip-hop has arguably permeated mainstream Western society more deeply than dancehall has in Jamaica. Some of hip-hop's largest stars have penetrated corporate America to a level even pop stars would envy: Jay-Z is part-owner of the National Basketball Association's Brooklyn Nets; 50 Cent made a fortune on a bottled water enterprise; etc. Although dancehall and hip-hop have similar grassroots origins, hip-hop has entered the American and Canadian cultural and economic establishment to a much higher degree.

Dancehall Fashion/Style

The “slackness” of dancehall lyrics—which often focus on guns, drugs, and sex—has been widely criticized. The gender politics of many dancehall lyrics are particularly problematic. Cooper claims that in dancehall lyrics, “the commodification of women's sexuality by men assumes truly vulgar proportions... Woman is reduced to a collection of body parts which seem to function independent of her will.”¹⁰⁵ Judging by the lyrics alone, it would appear that dancehall music and culture is profoundly misogynistic. Nonetheless, women play a central role in the culture through dancing and fashion.

¹⁰⁴ Henriques, *Sonic Bodies*, 16-17.

¹⁰⁵ Carolyn Cooper, *Noises in the Blood: Gender and the “Vulgar” Body of Jamaican Popular Culture*, (London: MacMillan, 1993), 162-163.

The role of the “Dancehall Queen” (DHQ) is crucial to dancehall culture. Dancehall Queen Stacey (DHQ 1999) asserts “the dance can’t happen without the dancers. They are the crowd pleasers; if the music has nothing to vibrate on, the dance can’t be nice.”¹⁰⁶ While male attendees commonly dance, female dancers are the focal point of dancehall events. In a manner similar to dreadlocks’ opposition to “proper” Jamaican sartorial aesthetics, dancehall fashion bucks traditional Jamaican female dress standards. Women wear cut-off shorts, elaborate colourful hairstyles, dominatrix-themed clothing, bright make-up, ostentatious jewelry, bra tops, tight dresses, as well as sequined, mesh, and lace clothing that leave little to the imagination.¹⁰⁷ Dancehall fashion ups the culture’s oppositional ante to match the confrontational lyrics and thundering basslines emitting from the speakers. In “Fabricating Identities: Survival and the Imagination in Jamaican Dancehall Culture,” Bakare-Yusuf suggests that women’s brash fashion choices in dancehall play a significant role. First, it disrupts the elite’s European-based notion of what is considered decent. She states:

While the aim of dancehall is meant to shock and rebel against the upper- and middle-class and Rastafarian ethos, it cannot be fully understood outside of an attempt to intervene against repressive attitudes towards female sexuality, appearance and comportment. Drawing on motifs of deviant sexuality and symbols of excessive femininity allows dancehall women to express sexual power and affirm their own sexual identification at the same time.¹⁰⁸

Dancehall fashion and beauty standards oppose Eurocentric ideas concerning femininity and female sexuality, providing instead a space in which women can assert themselves through bodily and sartorial decisions. Admittedly, the line between exploitation and assertion can be

¹⁰⁶ Stanley Niaah, *Dancehall*, 124.

¹⁰⁷ Bakare-Yusuf, “Fabricating Identities,” 5.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 10-11. Interestingly, Bakare-Yusuf includes Rastafarianism as part of what dancehall opposes, perhaps suggesting that even Rasta style has become too “conservative” in the eyes of the dancehall.

dangerously thin. But the very fact that female dancers dominate the dance floor challenges the notion of the dancehall as a masculine space. If “the dance can’t happen without the dancers,” as DHQ Stacey asserts, then it is clear that women command a strong presence within the culture.

Bibi Bakare-Yusuf argues that “working-class Black women in Jamaica use fashion to fabricate a space for the representation of self-identity and assertion of agency... Fashion allows dancehall women to challenge the patriarchal, class-based and (Christian and Rastafarian) puritanical logic operating in Jamaica.”¹⁰⁹ While I am inclined to agree with this analysis, a strong argument can be made that the role of women in dancehall fashion pales in comparison to the near total absence of women in virtually all other aspects of the genre. Historically, men have dominated reggae and dancehall; the overwhelming majority of the artists, musicians, producers, studio engineers, record label heads, selectors, deejays, and sound system engineers in reggae and dancehall have been men. This makes Michie Mee’s accomplishments all the more remarkable. She has successfully incorporated elements of dancehall fashion, dance and attitude (namely the “bad man” image or “bahd gyal” as she calls it) into her own work, adopting and adapting dancehall’s oppositional politics.

Having discussed the patterns of Jamaican immigration and Jamaican culture that made Michie Mee’s thoroughly hybridized performance persona and identity possible, I will turn my attention in the following chapter to her development as an artist and to some of the precedents for reggae/hip-hop hybrids, notably the work of KRS-One and Boogie Down Productions.

¹⁰⁹ Bakare-Yusuf, “Fabricating Identities,” 2.

CHAPTER 3: MICHIE MEE'S DEVELOPMENT AS AN ARTIST AND THE REGGAE/HIP-HOP CONNECTION

Michelle Becomes Michie

Michelle McCullock, professionally known as Michie Mee, was born in St. Andrew, Kingston, Jamaica¹¹⁰ in 1970. McCullock, with her family, emigrated from Jamaica to Toronto in 1976, and was raised in the neighbourhoods known as Weston¹¹¹ and Jane and Finch. McCullock was exposed to the music business early in life. Her father, a concert promoter in Jamaica, regularly worked with Motown recording artists, and was part of a group that brought the Jackson 5 to Kingston to perform on a double bill with reggae superstar Bob Marley.¹¹² McCullock was also inspired by *Ring Ding*, a children's program hosted by Louise Bennett, better known as Miss Lou, that ran on the Jamaican Broadcasting Corporation (JBC) between 1968 and 1980.¹¹³ The show featured Miss Lou singing songs and telling stories in her native patois to a live audience comprised largely of children – of which McCullock had been a member. While speaking on a panel entitled “Performing Diaspora 2013: Toronto Hip-hop Practitioners” at York University, McCullock recalled an early affinity for performance. She claims, “I was very influenced by a stage aspect, in terms of performance, so I always thought

¹¹⁰ “Bio,” Michie Mee, accessed November 2, 2014, <http://michiemee.com/bio>.

¹¹¹ Mitch Potter, “Meet Canada’s Hip-Hop Hope,” *Toronto Star*, November 18, 1988.

¹¹² The Harriet Tubman Institute, “Performing Diaspora 2013: Toronto’s Hip-Hop Practitioners,” Video of roundtable panel, June 1, 2013, York University, by The Harriet Tubman Institute for Research on the Global Migrations of African Peoples, posted July 25, 2013, accessed November 4, 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1s0m9l6zL0I>.

¹¹³ Andrea Davis, “From Jamaica to Canada: Miss Lou and the Poetics of Migration,” in *Jamaica in the Canadian Experience*, 230-245.

the stage was where I belonged.”¹¹⁴ As a young girl in Toronto, Michie claims dub poet

Lillian Allen also made a significant impression. She recalls:

Lillian Allen came to my [Brookhaven Avenue] public school when I first came from Jamaica... And I'd seen her do this whole expression of just singing and poetry and the whole thing, and it inspired me so much that I wanted to write, I wanted to write in the accent. She was one of the first people I had seen with my own eyes who would come to the school and was a black woman that was doing a cultural movement... I didn't even think that was possible in this country, so she definitely influenced.

The fact that both Allen's and Bennett's performance styles reflected their proud Jamaican heritage—and that they were both women—resonated with the young (pre-)Michie Mee.

Music in McCulloch's home also played a role in her early development. She states her initial musical loves were reggae and soul music,¹¹⁵ but country and western in addition to disco were played in the house as well. It was the Sugarhill Gang's 1979 international hit, "Rapper's Delight," that introduced the then nine-year-old McCulloch to hip-hop, but as a teen, it was frequent trips to visit relatives in New York City that greatly elevated her interest in hip-hop culture and to bring it back to Toronto. McCulloch states, "going to New York a lot, my family is from the Bronx, 223rd and Gun Hill Road, and Stardust was a hip-hop club where a lot of Zulu Nation¹¹⁶ and people hung out."¹¹⁷ It was this early access to hip-hop culture that helped a young McCulloch meet the duo that ultimately launched her recording career, namely Scott La Rock (Scott Sterling) and KRS-One (Lawrence Parker), a Bronx-based DJ and MC duo known

¹¹⁴ The Harriet Tubman Institute, "Performing Diaspora 2013."

¹¹⁵ Royalty Radio. "Royalty Radio: Michie Mee Interview and In-Studio Performance," posted July 25, 2012, accessed December 1, 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LaTgtKkvKMQ>.

¹¹⁶ The Universal Zulu Nation, founded in the 1970s by hip-hop pioneer Afrika Bambaataa, is an international organization that promotes and upholds the foundational tenets of hip-hop culture.

¹¹⁷ The Harriet Tubman Institute, "Performing Diaspora 2013."

collectively as Boogie Down Productions (BDP). She stresses, “back then we didn’t have internet, there was no way of connecting with everyone else... we actually had to go to Manhattan, go to the Bronx, go to Brooklyn, and be part of the scene, and you know, get in the mix.”¹¹⁸

Meanwhile, in Toronto, several others were dedicated to seeing hip-hop culture grow in their hometown. In 1983, Ron Nelson founded “Fantastic Voyage” on CKLN, Ryerson Polytechnical Institute’s campus radio station, to play hip-hop. The program’s early years also featured funk, partly because of Nelson’s personal preference, but also due to a shortage of rap records required to fill a three-hour time slot.¹¹⁹ Today, “Fantastic Voyage” is credited as Canada’s original hip-hop radio show. It was instrumental in not only exposing Toronto audiences to hip-hop culture, but also providing a platform for the city’s earliest rappers and DJs to be heard on the airwaves. As a fellow hip-hop radio DJ who promoted Vancouver artists on UBC’s CITR radio,¹²⁰ I can attest to the power of juxtaposing rap records by well-known and established American performers with local, unreleased or soon-to-be-released music. Sandwiching a local artist’s record between more established New York-based artists such as Boogie Down Productions and Eric B. and Rakim gave local performers exposure that increased their fan base considerably. Of course, it also helped that Michie Mee, along with numerous other early Toronto-based rappers, were producing tracks that were on par with those of their New York counterparts. Although this is an admittedly subjective assessment, records needed to

¹¹⁸ Char Loro, “BDC 951: Studio Interview with Michie Mee,” posted November 26, 2011, accessed December 2, 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fTvJ8QW0smI>.

¹¹⁹ Nelson, interview.

¹²⁰ “In Effect” on CITR 101.9 fm, UBC radio between 1989-1991.

meet certain lyrical and production standards for Nelson to maintain a level of quality control on his program. Michie Mee's early work clearly met those standards.

Michie Mee began rapping at the age of 14,¹²¹ and began performing regularly in her neighbourhood. One of her earliest performance experiences was a high school variety show. She recounts:

We had a variety show, and I wanted to be Salt N Pepa. So I was looking for my Salt n Pepa. I wasn't sure, but I was like, 'Pepa's Jamaican, I'm gonna be Pepa.' Right? But Salt, to me, was the spitter. 'Salt can spit, I'm gonna be Salt.' I was like, "They're both talented, so be nice, and I went and found a Salt N Pepa at the school, and it didn't work out. So, I ended up trying to be myself. And that's when I was like, 'you know what? you need a name.' I invented "Mich-E Mee" based off of Doug E. Fresh, so I wanted to be the female Mich-E Mee, then we cut it out and I became Michie Mee.¹²²

Throughout the 1980s, many mobile DJ crews – or “sound systems” as they were known in Jamaica and in Jamaican Canadian communities in Toronto – regularly played in and around the city. DJ crews such as Sunshine Sound, Maceo Sound, Chic Dynasty, Doc Sound, Sound Rebound and Kilawatt Sound Crew¹²³ mixed hip-hop with funk, reggae, and soca to large crowds. Although the DJ crews featured MCs, they did not rap in the traditional sense, but rather “hosted” the events. Nelson explains:

The MCs were more like MCs that weren't rapping, they were hosting events. Sunshine had a white guy, I remember, named Brother Different, he's one of the first MCs I remember. And he used to be funny, like he used to make jokes. He would play off the fact that he was white, and 99% of the crowd is black. So, it was kind of cool, you know, he exploited himself a little bit, but he did make a name for himself. There's other guys that were MCs as well... the music did the talking, not so much the MCs. We weren't

¹²¹ Potter, “Meet Canada's Hip-Hop Hope.”

¹²² Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, “Love, Props and the T.Dot,” posted July 14, 2012, accessed November 12, 2014, <http://www.cbc.ca/absolutelycanadian/docs/2012/07/14/love-props-and-the-t-dot>.

¹²³ Nelson, interview.

really talking that much at the time. Not like the parties today where the MCs dominate.¹²⁴

McCullock began as “the female MC” for Sunshine Sound Crew providing more exposure as she developed her on-stage persona. The hip-hop scene was small, yet budding performers, promoters, and DJ crews intermingled simply because there was no other way to make themselves known. According to McCullock, young rappers, dancers, and graffiti artists would hang out at Toronto’s Eaton Centre as a means of bonding as there was no other way to be seen. During her regular trips to New York, McCullock would return with bootlegged designer clothes by Louis Vuitton and MCM and sell them to her peers. This put money in her pocket but also provided her with status within the male-dominated rap scene.¹²⁵ During her stint as an MC for Sunshine Sound, fellow Toronto rapper K-4rce introduced McCullock to Ivan Berry, a local promoter and creator of Beat Factory Productions who, crucially, encouraged her to mix patois with her raps. McCullock recalls:

Ivan Berry made me believe that I could actually do the reggae in my rap because he built that confidence in me. I was like, ‘I’m not going to speak Jamaican in the studio, they’re not laughing at me, no way.’ And they’re like, ‘no, the labels actually want you to do something different, Michie, give it to them.’¹²⁶

The other key figures to influence and encourage McCullock to blend reggae and rap together were Scott La Rock and KRS-One. The two were beginning to make a name for themselves in New York with their reggae-tinged tracks such as “The P is Free” and “9mm Go Bang.” Like numerous other young aspiring hip-hop artists in the mid-1980s, La Rock and KRS would spend time in the city’s nightclubs that catered to a hip-hop audience. One such venue, Latin Quarters,

¹²⁴ Nelson, interview.

¹²⁵ OTA Live. “OTA Live: OTA Talk w/ Michie Mee,” posted Mar 17, 2009, accessed November 4, 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eRxgPh511cg>.

¹²⁶ Ibid.

was a popular Manhattan nightclub known as an “incubator for hip-hop’s golden era” and if “you were hot on stage on Friday, you were signed [to a recording contract] on Monday.”¹²⁷ Performers, journalists, record label owners, and A&R representatives all descended on “the LQ” on a nightly basis throughout the years 1985-1988.¹²⁸ With the help of false identification (easily found in tourist-heavy Times Square), McCullock descended on Latin Quarters to immerse herself in New York’s hip-hop culture. It was outside the storied nightclub where she would meet Scott La Rock and KRS-One. She approached Scott La Rock, and when he questioned the validity of her claim that there was hip-hop in Canada, she rapped to La Rock and KRS-One on the spot. This initial meeting with the duo would eventually bring them across the border for a series of concerts and “battles.” McCullock returned home and told Ron Nelson about BDP’s eagerness to promote themselves north of the border.

In addition to the “sound systems” spinning regularly in Toronto and providing an outlet for the budding hip-hop scene to coalesce, Ron Nelson’s “Fantastic Voyage” was crucial for youth in the city to hear rap on the radio, as the program “precipitated a demand for prominent New York hip-hop acts to appear at Nelson’s Monster Jams at the Concert Hall in Toronto.”¹²⁹ Nelson felt it was great way to promote local performers. He states:

For a long time, nobody had success. Yet they thought they were good, they thought they were trying to make names for themselves. ...That’s part of the reason I had my Monster Jams, which was a live event designed to promote local artists and local talent. ...one of the reasons we had our artists compete with international artists and battle was so we

¹²⁷ Davey D, “The History of the Latin Quarter-Hip Hop’s Legendary Nite Club,” posted January 30, 2012, accessed November 12, 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0h0c9EOo0GU>.

¹²⁸ Ibid.

¹²⁹ Del F. Cowie, “It Ain’t Where you From, It’s Where You At,” in *T Dot Griots: An Anthology of Toronto’s Black Storytellers*, edited by Steven Green and Karen Richardson (Victoria, BC: Trafford, 2004), 50.

could be on the map, we could get a name for ourselves, and we could be recognized because there's a lot of talent here.¹³⁰

At one of these battles, Michie Mee significantly increased her local profile. She recounts:

I just remember it as New York vs. Toronto, and it was just a battle, period. I don't even remember if there was a title to it or whatever. There was a female MC category, there was a DJ category, there was the male MC category, it was like Rumble vs. Boogie Down Productions. Myself vs. Sugar Love who came with Cutmaster DC... me, personally, I was fearless. I was like, you know, when she [Sugar Love] was rapping, I was like "gyal, I'm a Jamaican," and the whole crowd lost it."¹³¹

In what is now considered an historic moment in Canadian hip-hop history, Michie Mee competed against Brooklyn's Sugar Love in an MC battle. It was through this battle that Michie's rap/reggae vocal blend would become well known. Nelson described it as her secret weapon.¹³² Similarly, Ivan Berry recounts:

Michie would be rappin', rappin', rappin', and the crowd would be into it, and it's a neck and neck battle, tight, and then she would just drop a verse in reggae, and the crowd would lose it... *lose* it. And she would just win because she did that. American rapper just walks off the stage.¹³³

With Michie Mee's reputation growing as a bona fide battle rapper with a unique hybrid vocal technique, her next step was to enter the studio and record. Up to this point, McCulloch had only recorded a demo entitled, "I'm Not Afraid," with Beat Box Roger providing beatbox accompaniment,¹³⁴ a method of producing rhythms vocally (Doug E. Fresh and Biz Markie are well-known practitioners of this art form). In 1987, during one of their trips to Toronto, Scott La Rock and KRS-One accompanied the then 16-year old Michie Mee to a Hamilton studio to

¹³⁰ Nelson, interview.

¹³¹ OTA Live, "OTA Talk w/ Michie Mee."

¹³² CBC, "Love, Props and the T.Dot."

¹³³ Ibid.

¹³⁴ OTA Live, "OTA Talk w/ Michie Mee."

record “Elements of Style,” and “Run For Cover,”¹³⁵ the latter containing McCullock’s debut of patois in a recording.

As mentioned above, along with Ivan Berry, BDP members encouraged McCullock to add the Jamaican element to her music. As McCullock states,

Scott La Rock said, ‘you really need to put the Jamaican stuff in it.’ And KRS and them, they always used to laugh at me, like, ‘yo, just get her mad, speak Jamaican, speak Jamaican.’ And they used to have me in the Bronx trying to get me mad, to speak Jamaican. So, the accent wasn’t even registered yet to put it in music.¹³⁶

Although Michie Mee was comfortable using patois on stage, not to mention in the company of her mentors, she initially had reservations about using it on record. Both Berry and BDP saw it as a marketing ploy that would complement McCullock’s strong lyrics and rhyme flow.

Reggae/rap hybrid recordings would become commonplace in the 1990s; for example, Jamaican artists such as Super Cat, Shabba Ranks, and Cutty Ranks recorded over hip-hop style beats and/or collaborated on rap records. But in the 1980s, the combination of rap and reggae remained isolated to a few recordings. Aside from McCullock, BDP was the main exception, as they had become known for infusing patois and reggae samples into their music. Although reggae and DJ/sound system culture heavily influenced hip-hop music, actual reggae vocal or instrumental styles were not readily adopted. Therefore, it is important to note the small, but noticeable association between reggae and hip-hop that existed in New York rap recordings between 1979 and 1986, the latter being the year that BDP debuted their reggae-laced recording “The P is Free” (the B-Side to “South Bronx”).

¹³⁵ OTA Live, “OTA Talk w/ Michie Mee.”

¹³⁶ Ibid.

Reggae and hip-hop: 1979-1985.

According to Paul Sullivan's *Remixology: Tracing the Dub Diaspora*, Jamaican musicians and producers — part of a larger exodus of Jamaicans to England, Canada, and the United States in the 1960s and 1970s — set up recording studios, record labels, and record stores to promote and sell U.S.-based reggae.¹³⁷ One such musician, Lloyd “Bullwackie” Barnes, opened a studio in the Bronx in 1972 and would go on to establish a record label that recorded and distributed reggae that recalled the lo-fi sounds of Lee “Scratch” Perry and King Tubby. His label, Wackie's, released “Wack Rap” by rappers Solid C., Bobby D, and Kool Drop in 1979—the same year as Sugarhill Gang's “Rapper's Delight.” Brad Osborne, another Jamaican transplant, and owner of Clocktower Records Inc. (which released recordings by Jamaican artists such as Scientist, Alton Ellis, among others) created the Grand Groove imprint to release T-Ski Valley's 1981 underground rap hit “Catch the Beat.”¹³⁸ Sullivan suggests that even though sonic reggae influences were not yet prominent in hip-hop records of the day, hip-hop recordings released by reggae labels documented “what was happening musically in New York City at that time.”¹³⁹ Rota, Express, Love Train, Clappers, Reach Out International, and 12 Star are other New York-based reggae labels that released early hip-hop recordings. Meanwhile, in Jamaica, reggae labels released alternate versions of “Rapper's Delight.” In 1979, Gibbs Records pressed Xanadu and Sweet Lady's version. The A-side featured instrumentation close to the Sugarhill version; by contrast, the B-Side featured a “Rocker's Version” that included the vocalists toasting over a reggae rhythm. In 1980, the Techniques label released General Echo's “Rapping

¹³⁷ Paul Sullivan, *Remixology: Tracing the Dub Diaspora* (London: Reaktion Books, 2014), 93.

¹³⁸ *Ibid.*, 96.

¹³⁹ *Ibid.*, 95.

Dub Style.” The recording featured heavy echo, dub-style bass, and sound effects. Although reggae labels were involved in early rap productions, hip-hop’s initial wave of recordings did not contain overt reggae influences, vocally or musically. One prominent exception is 1984’s Brother D and Silver Fox collaboration on Reach Out International Records. The duo released a reggae-inspired cover of Brother D’s 1979 disco rap “How We Gonna Make the Black Nation Rise.” However, the cassette-only release failed to make an impact in New York or elsewhere.

It would not be until 1985 that well-known rappers would interpolate reggae sensibilities into a recording. The Fat Boys’ *Return of the Fat Boys* contained “Hard Core Reggae,” which featured the trio switching between American and Jamaican accents. Also that year, burgeoning hip-hop superstars Run D.M.C. recorded “Roots, Rap, Reggae,” with well-known dancehall-reggae vocalist Yellowman, for their sophomore LP *King of Rock*. These hybrid recordings are early examples of the kind of diasporic dialogue that would go on to animate the work of many subsequent hip-hop artists including Michie Mee. KRS-One cedes that these recordings predated his reggae/rap hybrid records but in Brian Coleman’s *Rakim Told Me: Hip-Hop Wax Facts, Straight From the Original Artists*, KRS emphasizes that “It still wasn’t what we was doin’.

They were rapping and Yellowman was doing his Jamaican patois. My style was to incorporate Jamaican patois language over hip-hop beats.”¹⁴⁰ BDP earlier recorded three singles under different group names: “Success is the Word” as 12:41; “Advance” as Scott La Rock and the Celebrity Three (with third member Levi 167); and, “Say No, My Brother (Crack Attack)” as Boogie Down Productions. After a perceived slight from top New York DJ Mr. Magic, BDP recorded their most popular record at that time, “South Bronx,” on the freshly created B-Boy

¹⁴⁰ Coleman, *Rakim Told Me*, 232.

Records.¹⁴¹ None of their recordings had yet featured an obvious reggae influence; however, the B-side to “South Bronx,” “The P is Free,” a record KRS described as detailing “how girls sell their bodies when they get hooked on crack” would be BDP’s first record to feature reggae vocal and musical styles. At the time, reggae’s influence on hip-hop was mostly a performance aesthetic. That is, DJs played records and an MC performed hosting duties, occasionally singing or “chatting” to/with the audience. Vocal or musical signifiers of reggae styles were largely absent, except in the releases mentioned above by independent reggae-centric New York labels. Boogie Down Productions brought a strong reggae/rap hybrid to light in 1986 and therefore played a significant role in developing this style, influencing later rappers who adopted the practice. Within the context of the present study, an examination of BDP’s reggae/rap hybrid recordings is instructive given the fact that the group played a major role in the style’s development, and in mentoring Michie Mee.

Boogie Down Productions

KRS-One and Scott La Rock initially met at a Bronx men’s shelter where KRS was a regular visitor and La Rock was a social worker. After a rocky start, they eventually became aware of each other’s musical abilities: KRS-One on the microphone, and Scott La Rock on the turntables. By 1986, the pair had toured the northeastern United States and Toronto and released three records with moderate success. “The P is Free,” is sparse and features a human beatbox and heavy reverb on KRS-One’s voice, a common technique used in Jamaican dub reggae records. Vocally, KRS interpolated two reggae artists popular in the 1980s, (and still popular now, for that matter): Super Cat and Yellowman. Super Cat’s “History” features the singer toasting the

¹⁴¹ Coleman, *Rakim Told Me*, 232.

lyrics “Wa-dawdaw-deng. Wa-daw-daw-daw-deng.” KRS-One sings a similar (if slightly off-key) melody and changes the vocables to “Da-dawdaw-day. Da-daw-da-daw-da-day. Ay!” The lyrics name-check Scott La Rock and two peripheral members of BDP, D-Nice (who beatboxes on the track) and Ms. Melodie. Additionally, the piece samples a melody from Yellowman’s “Zungguzungguguzung Guzeng.”

I am inclined to raise critical questions about the gender politics of “The P is Free,” which includes such problematic lyrics as “The pussy is free ‘cause the crack costs money.” Sarah Daynes claims that many 80s-era reggae records presented less Rastafarian-based spiritual themes and turned instead to “slackness,” a term used for lyrics focused on sexual and violent themes.¹⁴² A parallel shift—from party raps to more street-oriented themes—took place during roughly the same timeframe within hip-hop culture as evidenced by “The P is Free.” In 1985, Philadelphia’s Schoolly D released the proto-gangster rap “P.S.K - What Does It Mean?” A year later, Los Angeles-based Ice-T (with “P.S.K”’s vocal cadence as a vocal guide) delivered “6 in the Mornin’,” a tale involving shootouts, drugs, and eluding the police. The new direction in lyrical content marked the beginning of a not-so gradual change from party raps to a growing emphasis on the social realities of life in the ghetto (e.g. Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five’s “The Message”) to sexual themes and violence (2 Live Crew, N.W.A., Eazy-E, etc). While there may not be enough evidence to suggest any sort of causal link between the lyrical and thematic shifts within reggae and the analogous and roughly contemporaneous shifts within hip-hop, it is relevant to the present study to note that BDP were among the first hip-hop acts to incorporate signifiers of reggae into their music, including the growing emphasis on “slackness.”

When BDP released their debut album *Criminal Minded* in March of 1987, they

¹⁴² Daynes, *Time and Memory in Reggae Music*, 34.

continued the minimal, spatial ethos of “South Bronx” and “The P is Free.” That year, *Melody Maker* columnist Frank Owen observed, “as hardcore beats got slower and slower, the spaces between the beats would assume more and more importance and the reggae dub elements that were always inherent in hip-hop would come increasingly to the fore.”¹⁴³ BDP’s music not only reflected Jamaican vocal techniques, the sparse instrumentation mimicked the stripped down musical ethos of dub reggae. BDP recorded “Remix For P is Free,” with even more patois and references to Yellowman’s ““Zungguzungguguzung Guzeng.” In Yellowman’s track, he toasts over what is known in reggae circles as the “Disease” riddim, named after Michigan and Smiley’s “Diseases” itself drawn from Alton Ellis’s “Mad Mad.” Gone is D-Nice’s beatbox; in its place is an equally sparse kick and snare rhythm accompanied by 16th note hi-hats. In addition, co-producer Ced Gee, of Ultramagnetic MC’s, triggers a three-note guitar sample from his SP-12 drum machine courtesy of the “Disease” riddim. KRS-One has stated that the sample was lifted from Michigan and Smiley;¹⁴⁴ however, Yellowman’s riddim is so similar that it could be either artist. The lyrics in both versions of “The P is Free” are nearly the same except for the song’s introduction and near the end. In the remix, KRS uses several more patois phrases associated with dancehall reggae such as “live and direct, Boogie Down Productions is large!” He pronounces, “productions” as “produc-shawns,” and “large” as “lawdge” emulating a Kingston “yardie” accent. More reggae-centric words, inflections, and phrases include, “Bo!” “special request,” and “BDP Posse.” “Bo!” is slang for a gunshot, “special request” refers to the

¹⁴³ Frank Owen, “Boogie Down Productions, KRS-One, The Skinny Boys: Hip Hop Wig Out '87 #2: The Big Chill – Skinny Boys and Scott La Rock,” *Melody Maker*, March 28, 1987.

¹⁴⁴ Brian Coleman, *Rakim Told Me: Hip-Hop Wax Facts, Straight From the Original Artists* (Somerville, MA: Wax Facts Press, 2005), 234.

dancehall selector, and “posse” alludes to the imagery of the black outlaw.¹⁴⁵ KRS-One even refers to himself as “Deejay KRS” – another nod to dancehall wherein vocalists are referred to as deejays instead of MCs.

Although KRS-One does not use patois throughout the whole song, mild references to sex, drugs, and violence within the lyrical content are on par with the “slackness” that characterizes the lyrics of 80s-era dancehall reggae. Other standout tracks on *Criminal Minded* that reference dancehall reggae are “9mm Go Bang” and “The Bridge Is Over.” “9mm Go Bang” repeats the drug and violence narrative in “The P is Free” as KRS’s tale involves shootouts, botched drug deals, and murder. KRS-One again mimics Super Cat’s “History” but, in this instance, keeps the vocables and melody intact:

Wa-Daw-Daw-Deng
 Wa-Daw-Daw-Daw-Deng. Ay!
 Listen to my 9 millimetre go bang!
 Wa-Daw-Daw-Deng
 Wa-Daw-Daw-Daw-Deng. Ay!
 This is KRS-One

KRS then begins his tale:

Me knew a crack dealer by the name of Peter
 Had to buck him down with my 9 millimeter
 He said I had his girl, I said "Now what are you? Stupid?"
 But he tried to play me out and KRS-One knew it
 He reached for his pistol but it was just a waste
 ‘Cause my 9 millimeter was up against his face
 He pulled his pistol anyway and I filled him full of lead
 But just before he fell to the ground this is what I said

The narrative continues with a shootout as Peter’s “posse” seeks revenge. Again, the track

¹⁴⁵ Imani Perry, *Prophets of the Hood: Politics and Poetics in Hip-Hop* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004), 14.

references dancehall reggae's frequent allusions to gunfights and the Wild West.¹⁴⁶ KRS-One provides a Jamaican vocal inflection on the words "Peter" and "millimeter," pronouncing them as "Pe-tah," and "milli-metah." Also, he refers to marijuana by its Jamaican name, "sensimilla," and "sensemi" for short. Instrumentally, the track is sparse, with a slow tempo, and a reggae-style bass line periodically weaves in and out.

Perhaps the best known track from *Criminal Minded* is "The Bridge Is Over," which was directed at radio DJ Mr. Magic, as well as members of the Queens-based Juice Crew, a group of rappers and DJs affiliated with Mr. Magic. Marley Marl and MC Shan, who together recorded "The Bridge," the record BDP's "South Bronx" was responding to, subsequently answered with another salvo called "Kill That Noise." Thus, "The Bridge Is Over" was BDP's effort to continue the much-publicized "Bridge War" between the rivals.

I say, the bridge is over, the bridge is over, biddy-bye-bye!
 The bridge is over, the bridge is over, hey, hey!
 The bridge is over, the bridge is over, biddy-bye-bye!
 The bridge is over, the bridge is over

You see me come inna de dance wid de spliff of sensi
 Down with the sound called BDP
 If you want to join the crew, well, you must see me
 Ya can't sound like Shan or the one Marley
 Because Shan and Marley Marl dem-a-rhyming like they gay
 Pickin' up the mic, mon, dem don't know what to say
 Saying that hip-hop started out in Queensbridge
 Saying lies like that, mon, you know dem can't live
 So I tell them again, me come to tell them again, gwan!
 Tell them again, me come to tell them again
 Tell them again, me come to tell them again, gwan!
 Tell them again, me come to te-ell them
 Manhattan keeps on making it, Brooklyn keeps on taking it
 Bronx keeps creating it, and Queens keeps on faking it

Jamaican sound system culture deeply informs "The Bridge is Over" as KRS-One, and by

¹⁴⁶ A term Michie Mee also used to refer to her management and production crew (Beat Factory Posse).

extension, his crew BDP, battle a rival crew. Like the earlier examples, “The Bridge Is Over” is filled with patois and other signifiers of Jamaican culture. “Biddy Bye-Bye” means to put to sleep, as in KRS is shutting down his rivals attempt to win the battle. KRS-One also raps “inna de dance wid de spliff of sensi” instead of “in the dance[hall] with a (marijuana) joint.” When KRS-One sings “tell them again, me come to tell them again” he simulates the melody sung by Barrington Levy in “Murderer” as Levy sings “tell dem a ready we haf to tell dem again.” Moreover, KRS interpolates a melody from Super Cat’s “Boops,” playing the bassline on a piano but altering it slightly to provide a dissonant, sinister aural quality.

KRS explains how the patois evolved as a strategy used in live MC battles:

We’d go into these clubs and they’d set up the battle and I would just start rhyming, and it wasn’t just the Jamaican lyrics. It was how we battled. We battled like a Jamaican sound system. You played one record, then you’d rewind, and the crowd would go crazy... you took a familiar tune, which was also a Jamaican thing, and you turned it into a battle kind of thing.¹⁴⁷

Boogie Down Productions’ use of reggae melodies and samples along with an aggressive patois-filled rhyme style cemented the reggae-rap hybrid as an integral part of their music that was largely unique at the time. Notable exceptions are Michie Mee and the U.K.’s Asher D. and Daddy Freddy whose track “Ragamuffin Hip-Hop” “big-ups” (acknowledges) BDP in its lyrics.

Criminal Minded illustrates the group’s borrowing of patois, interpolations of popular reggae songs, and reggae-derived gangster or outlaw themes in its lyrics. *Criminal Minded*’s front and rear album cover further adds to Boogie Down Productions’ outlaw image. KRS is adorned in shoulder rounds (bullets) as the duo hold handguns.¹⁴⁸ The tragic murder of Scott La Rock in August of 1987 would cause a shift in KRS-One’s lyrical approach, “forc[ing] him to

¹⁴⁷ Coleman, *Rakim Told Me*, 232.

¹⁴⁸ Ibid., 234-235.

take stock of his own mortality as well as his artistic, professional, and spiritual well-being.”¹⁴⁹ The reggae influence in BDP’s music would increase even more.

KRS-One continued recording under the Boogie Down Productions banner, rapidly following up *Criminal Minded* with *By All Means Necessary* (1988), *Ghetto Music: The Blueprint of Hip-Hop* (1989), *Edutainment* (1990), *Live Hardcore Worldwide* (1991), and *Sex and Violence* (1992). He also produced fellow Bronx-based rapper Just-Ice’s 1987 sophomore LP *Kool and Deadly (Justicizms)* which contained reggae-tinged tracks such as “Lyric Licking,” featuring the “I’m Not Going Crazy” riddim, and “Moshitup,” interpolating the bassline from Dignitary Stylish’s “Jah Send Mi Come.” KRS-One’s “outlaw” image would continue as the rapper held an Uzi on the Malcolm-X-inspired front cover of *By All Means Necessary*. A year later, the artwork for *Ghetto Music: The Blueprint of Hip-Hop* would depict a defiant KRS posing opposite a police officer. While dancehall reggae culture continued to inform the direction of BDP’s instrumentation and image, KRS-One’s lyrical themes began to reflect a changing worldview. On *By All Means Necessary*, tracks such as “Stop the Violence,” and “Necessary” reflect the rapper’s concern with violence in the African-American community. “Stop the Violence” features more evident reggae instrumentation than on *Criminal Minded*, which might be read as a call for solidarity between African diasporic communities in Jamaica and North America in response to their shared experiences of violence and oppression. Although most of her work is not overtly political, Michie Mee is one of the few Canadian artists who answered that call by combining a range of signifiers drawn from both Jamaican dancehall and

¹⁴⁹ S. Craig Watkins, *Hip-Hop Matters: Politics, Pop Culture, and the Struggle for the Soul of a Movement* (Boston MA: Beacon Press, 2006), 240.

hip-hop.

CHAPTER 4: MICHIE MEE – EARLY RECORDINGS

In 1987, BDP produced Michie Mee's first recordings "Elements of Style" and "Run For Cover," which were released in Canada on *Break'n Out*,¹⁵⁰ a compilation album by Up Your Records, and Justice Records in the United Kingdom. Along with Michie Mee and L.A. Luv, the album featured fellow Toronto acts Rumble and Strong, an MC/DJ combo, and Streetbeat, a dance-oriented r&b duo featuring Rupert Gayle, L.A. Luv's older brother. It should be noted that BDP also produced Rumble and Strong's tracks, yet they contained no overt reggae styles. Two years later, however, Rumble and Strong would score a U.K. hit with "Crazy Jam" (Gee Street Records, 1989), a reggae/rap hybrid that sampled the infectious bassline from "Under Mi Sleng Teng." Rumble (David Morgan) would later go solo and release more reggae/rap recordings such as "Safe," on his self-titled LP *Rumble* (1993). Therefore, Michie Mee was not the only Toronto rapper to perform in the reggae/rap style, but she was the first to record a track in that manner. Moreover, she was the most prominent rapper to do so given her reputation as a successful and fierce battle rapper.

"Elements of Style" and "Run For Cover" were Scott La Rock's last recordings before his untimely passing in August of 1987. Michie Mee recalls: "Scott La Rock mainly did the producing. And we went to the studio in Hamilton with some rock guys who were on acid and didn't care what we did in there. So we sat there, and we wrote and recorded."¹⁵¹ These tracks

¹⁵⁰ The compilation featured both tracks plus instrumental versions.

¹⁵¹ Del Cowie, "Michie Mee is the First Lady of Toronto Hip-Hop," *Noisey: Music By Vice*, posted April 21, 2015, accessed June 1, 2015, http://noisey.vice.com/en_ca/blog/michie-mee-dancehall-rap-toronto-interview-2015.

provided Michie Mee and L.A. Luv exposure in the United States and the United Kingdom.

Up until that point, Michie's repertoire was primarily battle-type raps written for MC competitions she regularly entered.

“Elements of Style” (1987, Justice Records)

“Elements of Style,” along with “Run For Cover,” are Michie Mee's first officially released recordings. “Elements of Style” does not contain any overt Jamaican signifiers as she raps without any patois or Jamaican references. Lyrically and musically, the track is typical for its braggadocious rhymes and simple backing track, which consists of a looped bassline and scratched vocals from Taana Gardner's “Heartbeat” and horns from Freedom's “Get Up and Dance.” One of the most notable features of the track is the spoken introduction.

The track begins with KRS-One introducing the young Canadian emcee:

Boogie Down Productions is proud to introduce, Canada's greatest, musically inclined, intellectual representative for the rap industry on a whole, a major breakthrough for female MCs everywhere. Her name... Michie Mee. This is BDP reporting live from Canada!

Since Boogie Down Productions was producing Michie Mee's first official release, it was in their best interest to promote her work through this spoken introduction. First, KRS claims BDP is “proud to present” Michie Mee. BDP were a relatively new group but were riding a wave of popularity due to their groundbreaking debut, *Criminal Minded*. Therefore, based on the cultural capital the duo had obtained, their producing and co-signing of the young Canadian MC jumpstarted her career. However, they probably would not have produced and backed her if they did not feel she was worth their praise and support. After all, they had a reputation at stake.

Second, KRS announces that Michie Mee is “Canada’s greatest.” In 1987, with Toronto’s (and Canada’s hip-hop) scene in its infancy, KRS’s declaration that Michie was the country’s greatest was not that far of a stretch. Michie Mee had established herself as a fierce competitor in MC battles, earning her reputation by defeating both local and out-of-town MCs. Other MCs in the area such as K-4rce, Lady K, Ken-E-Krush, Get Loose Crew (among others) were also part of Toronto’s young hip-hop scene. But it was Michie Mee who seemed to have the most support from those who could help her, including BDP, Ivan Berry, Ron Nelson, and the Sunshine Sound Crew, all of whom lent their support to the talented rapper.

KRS-One’s introduction of Michie Mee in “Elements of Style” also describes her as an “intellectual representative for the rap industry on a whole.” In 1987, the concepts of “intellectual” or “conscious” rap lyrics were relatively new. Eric B. and Rakim’s *Paid in Full* contained significantly different rhyme schemes, vocal cadences, and lyrical content that reflected the Five Percent Nation, a group that split from the Nation of Islam. Public Enemy’s *Yo! Bum Rush the Show* contained pro-black, and sometimes militant lyrics. BDP’s *Criminal Minded* contained gangster themes and gun talk, but was tempered somewhat by KRS’s then burgeoning view of himself as a poet and teacher, roles that would be more pronounced in his following full-length releases, *By Any Means Necessary* (1988), and *Ghetto Music: The Blueprint of Hip-hop* (1989).

Some of the figures associated with “intellectual” or “conscious” rap provide trenchant examples of what Grant Farred has called the “black vernacular intellectual.” Farred states the vernacular intellectual is “situated within the popular, frequently racialized experience of disempowered constituencies [...] who understand, utilize, and deploy vernacularity as a

discourse within and against the dominant sphere.”¹⁵² In other words, the vernacular intellectual may not travel in the same circles as “traditional” academics, yet the former’s reach is potentially greater due to their vernacular roots and modes of discourse, and widespread exposure within and across communities, whether in person or transmission through mass media. Farred cites Muhammad Ali and Bob Marley as two examples of black vernacular intellectuals. KRS-One’s self-identification as a “teacher” and “poet”¹⁵³ may, on the surface, seem like stereotypical hip-hop self-aggrandizing; however, he—along with Rakim and Chuck D—did a great deal to popularize the concept of the “intelligent” MC. By covering topics such as self-sufficiency, resistance to patriarchal constructs, and cultural self-awareness, Michie Mee aligned herself with this strain of hip-hop culture. Therefore, KRS-One’s characterization of Michie Mee as “intellectual representative for the rap industry on a whole,” accurately foreshadows many aspects of her career, placing her in illustrious company and separating her from most other MCs of the era, male or female. The most popular female rappers to that point were Salt N Pepa, the Queens, New York-based duo (along with DJ Spinderella) who scored a global crossover Top 40 hit with “Push It,” a track with a blatant sexual connotation. Other popular female MCs from the time include Roxanne Shante, whom Michie Mee had gotten to know on her trips to New York. Shante, too, was a vicious battle rapper who was known to defeat female and male MCs alike. Also, MC Lyte, with whom Michie Mee would eventually collaborate with as label-mates could certainly have been categorized in the “intellectual MC” camp based on her anti-crack song, “I Cram 2 Understand U (Sam).”

¹⁵² Grant Farred, *What’s My Name: Black Vernacular Intellectuals* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), 12.

¹⁵³ Boogie Down Productions, “Poetry,” by L. Parker and S. Sterling, *Criminal Minded*, B-Boy BB4787 JMM, 1987, 33 1/3 rpm.

In the last portion of KRS's introduction, he declares that Michie Mee represents "a major breakthrough for female MCs everywhere." Although the nature of this comment is meant to be complimentary, I am inclined to raise questions about the fact that he positions Michie Mee as a great "female" MC specifically. It is not unlike a political pundit today describing Barack Obama as a "Black President," instead of just "President," thus, normalizing the role as white. KRS-One's comment runs the risk of normalizing the role of hip-hop MC as male. Hip-hop, since its inception, has been a male-dominated sphere. While women have participated in every aspect of the culture (and continue to the present day), a variety of discourses within, and surrounding, hip-hop have worked to minimize their contributions. Unlike dancehall reggae culture, which emphasizes the involvement of women dancers as a focal point, hip-hop concerts, on occasion, are overwhelmingly male dominated. KRS-One's comments were undoubtedly well intentioned. After all, Michie Mee was indeed unique within the industry: she was an established battle rapper with considerable skills who could switch comfortably between Canadian English and Jamaican patois. Therefore, describing her as a "major breakthrough" was not just hyperbole.

Lastly, it is significant that KRS-One's exclamation "this is BDP reporting live from Canada!" alerts listeners, both local and international, that the track was a Canadian recording.¹⁵⁴ In 1987, the vast majority of rap music was still produced in New York. Hip-hop scenes were steadily growing in Philadelphia, Los Angeles, Miami, and Houston, among others, but New York rappers and DJs dominated the hip-hop landscape on labels including Def Jam Recordings

¹⁵⁴ The Harriet Tubman Institute, "Performing Diaspora 2013." (Michie Mee recalls the recording sessions taking place in Hamilton).

and Cold Chillin' Records, which had international distribution from CBS (now Sony) and Warner Brothers, respectively. Highlighting Michie Mee's nationality in the introduction revealed to rap fans everywhere that there was a burgeoning hip-hop scene in Canada.

"Elements of Style" contains brash braggadocious rhymes, similar to those Michie Mee used in MC battles:

I don't take dives in a battle, I'm live
All you MCs start to quiver 'cause I've arrived

You wanna battle me, forget it I'm a killer
I kill MCs like Jack the Ripper

I'll put your head out for the three count
[James Brown sample] "One, two, three" You're out

KRS One: Michie Mee, why can't other rappers compete
'Cause all these others are [scratched sung vocals] "so weak"

Healthy competition and rivalries have always been a part of hip-hop culture. Dating back to its formative years, DJs, MCs, b-boys, and graffiti artists battled against one another for territory, bragging rights, and cash. With the advent of hip-hop as a recorded medium, rapping became the most visible form of hip-hop battling. The history of the live MC battle can be traced to Afrological forms such as "the dozens" – a game of verbal dexterity featuring combatants alternating personal, yet humorous attacks on one another. As hip-hop became a recorded medium, such battles were recorded on vinyl. Although hip-hop's battle mentality is often masculinist in nature, many women entered the battle arena just as fiercely as men as a way to earn their stripes as rappers. Often times, female rappers had to fight for attention to get noticed, even if it was at the expense of belittling fellow female MCs.

“Run For Cover” (Justice, 1987)

Although “Elements of Style” did not contain any references to Jamaican dancehall music or culture, the flip-side, “Run For Cover,” marks McCulloch’s first song to feature patois. The beat is comprised of a drum machine recreating the drum break from The Soul Searchers’ “Ashley’s Roachclip,” which was famously sampled on Eric B. & Rakim’s “Paid in Full.” Fleshing out the track are scratched horns also lifted from “Ashley’s Roachclip.”

Michie Mee uses patois in the choruses and for eight bars in her fourth verse. In the chorus, she sings:

Gonna run for covah,
 Gonna run for covah, uh huh
 Gonna run for covah,
 Gonna run for covah, come follow me
 Gonna run for covah,
 Gonna run for covah, uh huh
 Gonna run for covah,
 Gonna run for covah

Particular emphasis is placed on the last syllable of cover, which with a Jamaican inflection becomes “covah.” Also, and perhaps deliberately, “Gonna run for covah” follows the same cadence as BDP’s “The Bridge Is Over,” released earlier that year:

The bridge is over
 The bridge is over, biddy bye bye
 The bridge is over
 The bridge is over hey hey
 The bridge is over
 The bridge is over, biddy bye bye
 The bridge is over
 The bridge is over

“The Bridge is Over” was an “answer” record that initiated the now infamous “bridge wars” between BDP and the Juice Crew. It was highly popular, and perhaps Michie’s mimicking of the

chorus was an attempt to piggyback off the track's success. "Run For Cover" was not nearly as successful as "The Bridge Is Over," and remains something of a footnote in Canadian hip-hop history. However, it is significant because it allowed Michie Mee to gain much-needed exposure, and the reggae-tinged chorus hinted that there were multiple layers to her identity.

Lyrically, "Run For Cover" consists of battle rhymes in which Michie Mee attacks would-be rivals who challenge her status as an MC. The following lyrics illustrate this point:

'Cause you beat me, an impossible plan
 The name Michie Mee is a name that will stand
 When you hear me on the mic, be bright, step off
 'Cause all you female MCs, I think you're soft

No females on my mic, they're sure to get [tear]
 The opposition's always dissin' but I don't care
 In the art of MCin' I am self-taught
 I can't count all the battles that I have fought

All you other MCs don't try to put me to a test
 'Cause I'm produced by BDP, Scott Larock and K-R-S

The track is also significant for its verse in patois, which also doubles as a means for Michie to direct more verbal barbs towards her opponents:

Some gyal nowadays sey dem reddy but mi jus
 Cock up mi batty to mi enemy
 Mi nuh waan no ragamuffin cum battle Michee Mee
 Before yuh touch mi mike yuh betta wash yuh baddy, because
 mi wi tell yuh how yuh look like a harrow movie,
 You nuh waan cum tes yes mi a di best, yes mi nah fess
 So jus res

Translation:

Some girls nowadays say they are ready but
 I just raise my bottom to my enemy
 I don't want any outlaw to battle Michee Mee
 Before you touch my man you better wash your body because
 I will tell you how you look like a horror movie
 You want to come and test

Yes I'm the best, no fuss
So just rest

It is not hard to imagine these lyrics as part of Michie Mee's arsenal during her early MC battles. When Ivan Berry mentioned the crowd "losing it" during Michie's use of patois in an MC battle, he may have been speaking about lyrics such as those quoted above. On paper, they may seem ordinary, but in the context of an MC battle, in front of a horde of supporters who are either Jamaican, or recognize the patois as a distinct element of Toronto's multicultural identity, the effect could be quite devastating for her opponents. In other words, Michie Mee's use of patois on record and in MC battles was a powerful cultural signifier of both her Jamaican and Canadian identity, insofar as it symbolized both her birthplace and her adopted hometown.

On the strength of "Elements of Style" and "Run for Cover," Michie Mee toured extensively and caught the interest of Brooklyn-based First Priority Music, signaling the next phase of her recording career and expanding her opportunities to create reggae-inspired hip-hop music that expresses her hybrid identity. The attention McCulloch received in 1987 led to a tour with Sinead O'Connor¹⁵⁵ and further recordings. However, with the tragic death of Scott La Rock in August of 1987, McCulloch looked to her inner circle for production assistance. McCulloch remembers:

My career would have gone in a whole 'nother direction had he been here... From that, I leaned more into the First Priority Camp than BDP. I released a record with MC Lyte; they had a compilation distributed in the U.S. We got a budget from First Priority and took MuchMusic cameras and staff to Jamaica. Conceptually, we wanted to do an album that was one-half reggae, one-half hip-hop. In Toronto, every rapper was mimicking American sounds, so we wanted to move away from that.¹⁵⁶

¹⁵⁵ "Michie Mee," CBC Music, accessed May 4, 2014, <http://music.cbc.ca/#!/artists/Michie-Mee>.

¹⁵⁶ Tony Young and Dalton Higgins, *Much Master T: One VJ's Journey* (Toronto: ECW Press, 2002), 119-120.

First Priority Music, home to MC Lyte and Audio Two, released Michie Mee and L.A. Luv's "Victory is Calling" as a single with "On this Mic" as the B-side, songs that also appeared on a compilation showcasing First Priority's roster entitled *The First Priority Music Family: Basement Flavor*.

"Victory is Calling" (First Priority Music, 1988)

"Victory is Calling" was Michie Mee's first official release on her new label. The beat in the track does not contain dancehall-inspired rhythms; rather, it is a 4/4 time mid-tempo rhythm (99 bpm) that was typical for late 1980s hip-hop. It contains a sampled snare drum shot and drum roll courtesy of James Brown's "Funky Drummer." Additionally, a two-bar guitar loop lifted from "Cissy Strut" by The Meters fuels each chorus.

Vocally, the song begins with Michie Mee and King Lou (Louis Robinson), a member of Toronto's Dream Warriors, engaging in patois banter. King Lou begins the record with a brief exchange with an imaginary transit employee (also played by King Lou), or perhaps a taxi operator:

[King Lou] One stop Mr. Driver
 [King Lou as Driver] Where do you wanna get off, eh?
 [King Lou] Beat Factory!
 [Driver] Ok

King Lou performs the first line with a Jamaican inflection (or at least, a West Indian inflection); therefore, "driver," becomes, "drivah." Significantly, when Lou performs the voice of the driver, the inflection disappears. Moreover, Lou adds perhaps the most recognizable part of Canadian speech, namely the question/exclamation "eh?" This is a subtle, yet important, example of code-

switching: Lou removes the Caribbean inflection from his voice, thus allowing the listener to distinguish between the two characters. Also, the addition of the stereotypical Canadian “eh?” signals the location of their supposed bus ride. “Eh?” may not direct the listener to Toronto, but it certainly points to Canada.

Immediately following this exchange is a verse by MC Lyte; an endorsement similar to KRS-One’s introduction on “Elements of Style.” Whereas KRS speaks candidly of Michie’s skill and importance (“Canada’s ambassador of hip-hop culture”) MC Lyte offers an eight-bar rhyme that connotes solidarity with Michie Mee and female MCs in general:

We are women, hear us roar
 Coming out fresh and fly than we did before
 This is MC Lyte on the mic with an appetite
 To see a fellow female do it right like
 This, down to the marrow of the bone
 Michie Mee take the microphone
 And, uh, do a mic check and earn your respect
 With a rhyme Michie Mee, tell’em what it’s gonna be

Although MC Lyte had a reputation as being a formidable rapper, and occasionally engaged in battles against other female MCs, her opening verse suggests solidarity with her Canadian label mate. Just as Boogie Down Productions had attempted earlier, MC Lyte used her cultural capital as a popular MC to support Michie Mee on her crucial debut U.S. release. In 1989, Michie Mee would appear in Queen Latifah’s landmark video for “Ladies First” (Tommy Boy Records), a song with guest vocalist Monie Love that acted as a call to arms for female MCs in hip-hop to support one another.

“Victory is Calling” is significant not just for its use of patois in the introduction, but for lyrics that make reference to Michie Mee’s “posse,” home town, and adopted country, as well as Jamaican referents, articulating her identity at a local, national and international level. As Murray

Forman reminds us in *The Hood Comes First: Race, Space, and Place in Rap and Hip-Hop*, “rap’s lyrical constructions commonly display a pronounced emphasis on place and locality,”¹⁵⁷ something that is certainly on display in much of Michie Mee’s music and on “Victory is Calling” in particular. Indeed, “Victory Is Calling” is perhaps the clearest example of Michie Mee’s use of regional signifiers in her lyrics. She raps:

In a world of style, this one stands alone
 Michie Mee is From Toronto, no American clone
 'Cause I possess artist’s materials
 You try to beat the Factory, I’ll blow you to oblivion
 [King Lou] Oblivion?
 Oblivion
 [King Lou] Michie, here we go again
 Ya ready? The label is First [Posse shouts – “Priority!”]

This example from the first verse displays Michie’s affiliations to her hometown, her production team (Beat Factory), and her record label (First Priority). In doing so, she affirms her Canadian identity, but also a specific allegiance to Toronto. It is significant that she states that she is “no American clone.” As Edward Said reminds us: “The development and maintenance of every culture require the existence of another, different and competing alter-ego. The construction of identity... involves the construction of opposites and ‘others’ whose actuality is always subject to the continuous interpretation and reinterpretation of their differences than ‘us.’”¹⁵⁸ By emphasizing that she is “no American clone,” Michie Mee articulates her identity in opposition to a “different and competing alter-ego,” namely the United States. But she also gives a shout out to First Priority Music, which made her the first Canadian rapper to be signed by a U.S. Label.

¹⁵⁷ Murray Forman, *The Hood Comes First: Race, Space, and Place in Rap and Hip-Hop*, (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2002), xvii.

¹⁵⁸ Edward Said, *Orientalism* (London: Penguin, 1978), 332.

On “Victory is Calling,” Michie Mee claims allegiance to Toronto, Canada, her production crew, and record label. She also alludes to her Jamaican heritage in the final verse although in a manner that is not as obvious as her use (and King Lou’s) of patois. Towards the song’s end, Michie describes a physical gesture of disrespect that is common in West Indian cultures:

When I got beef, I kiss my teeth
Not many posse can stop me

Otherwise known as “chupsing,” Mark V. Campbell classifies the action as an “oral gesture with meanings that range from frustration, to indifference to disrespect.”¹⁵⁹ He adds that chupsing derives from “Afrodiasporic populations, whose linguistic diversity sought to find an effective way to convey meaning under the most oppressive conditions of enslavement.”¹⁶⁰ In other words, coded facial gestures, or small oral sounds served the purpose of conveying meaning to allies while keeping them hidden from oppressors. Michie Mee performs the act as a substitute for a verbal dressing down of her opponent. The brevity of such an action suggests that her opponent is not worth the effort, and a simple kissing of the teeth will suffice.

Additionally, Michie uses the Jamaican referent term “posse” to refer to a rival crew.¹⁶¹ Forman credits Laurie Gunst’s *Born Fi Dead: A Journey Through the Jamaican Posse Underworld* with illuminating the connection between the term and hip-hop’s rise in the 1980s. The use of “posse” was born out of Jamaican’s love for films depicting the “cowboy and Indian” mythology of the American old west. “Posse” was later adopted to refer to the “stratified and

¹⁵⁹ Campbell, “The Gwannings,” 126.

¹⁶⁰ Ibid., 127.

¹⁶¹ Forman, *The Hood Comes First*, 177.

violent gang culture that gained strength through the ganja, cocaine, and crack trade.”¹⁶² The term eventually moved into the hip-hop lexicon, as the Jamaican “posse system” spread throughout North American cities, Toronto included. Examples of the term’s spread include Michie’s mentors in “BDP Posse,” (Boogie Down Productions), or “The Paid in Full Posse” (Eric B. & Rakim), “The 98 Posse” (Public Enemy), “N.W.A. and the Posse” (N.W.A.), and the Native Tongues Posse. Tellingly, all four examples were prominent hip-hop entities in the late 1980s.

“Victory is Calling” ends with Michie Mee again giving shout-outs to members of her inner circle, and to key players within Toronto’s hip-hop and media industry. With a Jamaican inflection, she names Ivan Berry, First Priority Music, MC Ken E. Krush, and other artists and colleagues. Notably, Michie Mee “big-ups” MuchMusic and Michelle Geister. MuchMusic, Canada’s answer to MTV, was instrumental in providing Michie Mee crucial exposure early in her career. As a teen growing up on the other side of Canada, I recall viewing MuchMusic footage that showed Michie Mee on stage and in the recording studio. In fact, Michie Mee was the first Canadian rapper I ever heard. Michelle Geister was partly responsible for the creation of “Rap City,” the network’s video program dedicated solely to rap music. The show, initially produced weekly episodes, but eventually expanded to daily programming due its popularity. By shouting out friends and colleagues in Toronto, as well as “The Nation’s Music Station,” as the network promoted itself, Michie Mee further established her Canadian identity alongside her Jamaican heritage.

¹⁶² Forman, *The Hood Comes First*, 177.

“On This Mic” (First Priority Music, 1988)

If some of Michie Mee’s previous recordings provided glimpses into her Jamaican background, “On This Mic” was by far her most significant attempt (to that point at least) to signify her Jamaican identity while also indicating local and national allegiances. With lyrics originally designed for MC battles,¹⁶³ “On This Mic,” also features her greatest excursion into patois, and a rhythmic change to a dancehall beat that complements her Jamaican vocals. Michie Mee recounts:

It was just the battle era. It was letting people know that I’m here. I’m Michie Mee, lick a gyal ‘pon the hard concrete. I was really expressing who I was 100%... “On This Mic” was my introduction. It’s my get everything off my chest, I’m here I’m a battle girl, people here I am. The body of it is the same formula I follow today, with just a little piece of reggae. That’s a perfect skeleton or the template of what Michie was. ‘On This Mic’ describes me.¹⁶⁴

The song embodies the image that the young rapper had been slowly crafting and encapsulates her identity as a battle rapper with the ability to perform in a dancehall style that was both unique and authentic. Moreover, Michie’s rap/reggae style articulated a dual Canadian/Jamaican identity that reflected her experience as a Jamaican immigrant in a diasporic city. One example of her expression of her Canadian identity is the line:

I live in Canada, my area’s good to go
Don’t you know good things grow in Ontario

She not only declares that she is Canadian, but also calls out her home province of Ontario by referencing the tagline (“Good things grow in Ontario”) from a popular publicity campaign by Foodland Ontario created in 1977 to inform residents about the benefits of buying local products.

¹⁶³ Cowie, “Michie Mee is the First Lady of Toronto Hip-Hop.”

¹⁶⁴ Ibid.

Unlike “Victory is Calling” (which contains no overt dancehall reggae musical signifiers and limits the use of patois to the introduction and outro), “On This Mic” features Michie Mee performing in patois mid-verse. Additionally, the instrumentation switches to a dancehall rhythm. The beat, at 95 bpm, is slower than “Victory is Calling,” yet it is similar in construction and style. The beat contains a ½ bar guitar sample courtesy of The JB’s “Givin’ Up Food For Funk,” and a two-bar guitar and horn loop from the same record. Additionally, two short vocal yelps from Lyn Collins’ “It Takes Two” appear in each chorus – the same short vocal samples heard in Rob Base and D.J. E-Z Rock’s “It Takes Two,” a 1988 international crossover mainstream hit. What is atypical in “On This Mic,” especially for hip-hop at the time, is Michie Mee’s shift from non-affected Canadian English to Jamaican patois in her third verse providing a particularly deft example of code-switching. She moves fluidly from one speech pattern to another and then changes back again. This move, aside for stylistic reasons, represents a powerful assertion of her hybrid Jamaican Canadian identity. The corresponding shift in the backing rhythm to a dancehall-inspired beat complements the linguistic shift.

Figure 4.1 “The quintessential dancehall riddim.” ¹⁶⁵

The above drum pattern, common in dancehall reggae, represents a single measure in 4/4 time. If divided into 16th notes, the kick drum falls on the first, fourth, ninth, and twelfth notes of the measure. Meanwhile, the snare drum is placed on the sixth and fourteenth notes. Even if the listener is unfamiliar with the dancehall reggae reference, the change in rhythm should be

¹⁶⁵ Manuel and Marshall, “The Rhythm Method,” 457.

audible to the uninitiated. Moreover, fans of dancehall (and the majority of Jamaicans) will most likely recognize the shift and appreciate it along with Michie Mee's patois.

"On This Mic" features braggadocious battle rhymes consistent with Michie Mee's previous efforts, both onstage and in the studio. Again, she attacks would-be challengers to her status as a formidable rapper:

People here I am, and here I am people
Not tryin' to be conceited but there's no one equal
I'm not here for dissin', just to make you listen
And give you a taste of the lyrics I be dishin'

My raps get harder in order to rock crews
So just look at all the sucker MCs that withdrew
'Cause they're playing it smart and thinking it over
King Lou: [Can Michie be beaten?] I wonder, I wonder

However, in the third verse, Michie responds to critics (voiced by King Lou) who may question her choice in genre.

People always ask
[King Lou] "Michie why do you keep makin'?"
Hip funky sounds when you know you are Jamaican
I answer to them with the [aid] of my fist
Then add the reggae to my vocals make my rhymes sound crisp

[Rhythm switches to dancehall beat for seventeen bars]

Hear mi now
Cah mi seh sen fi di dutty
Cah mi seh sen fi di dutty
Cah mi seh sen fi di dutty gyal wey waan come touch, but nuh ave nuh beat, beat
Sen fi di dutty gyal wey waan come touch, but nuh ave nuh beat, beat
Naw na-na na na na no good beat
Naw na-na na na na no good beat, jus
Look how mi nice an look how mi sweet, an
I'm Michee Mee nuh luv pon street, an
Gyal try test mi mus cuss blood cleat, an
Tek up mi tool lick out two front teeth, an
Bang had head pon di hard concrete
See dem a try get mike but Mee mi nah run

See dem a try hype but me mi nah run, jus
 Sen fi di dutty gyal wey waan cum touch but nuh ave nuh beat, beat
 Sen fi di dutty gyal wey waan cum touch but nuh ave nuh beat beat
 Naw na na na na na no good beat
 Naw na na na na na no good beat
 Wen mi deh pon stage yuh know di good haffi spread
 Is Michee Mee on dis mike? A sey what ave to be said

Translation:

Hear me now
 Because I say, send for the dirty
 Because I say, send for the dirty
 Because I say send for the dirty girl who wants to come and touch but have no beat, beat
 Send for the dirty girl who wants to come and touch but have no beat, beat
 Na, na-na, na na na, no good beat [music]
 Na, na-na, na na na, no good beat, just
 Look how I'm nice and, look how I'm sweet, and
 I'm Michee Mee, no love pon the street, and
 Gyal try to test me, I'll curse blood cleat, and
 Take up my tool knock out two teeth, and
 Bang her head upon the hard concrete
 See how they try to get the mike but me, me naw run won't run
 See how they try to hype [do better] but I won't run
 Send for the dirty girl who wants to come and touch and have no beat, beat
 Send for the dirty girl who wants to come and touch but have no beat, beat
 Na, na-na, na na na, no good beat
 Na, na-na, na na na, no good beat
 When I'm on stage, you know the good news have to spread
 Is Michee Mee on this mic? I say what has to be said

Within the patois verse, Michie Mee continues her attack on would-be opponents and the lyrics turn violent. She challenges other female MCs, and despite her “nice” and “sweet” exterior, if “gyal try to test,” assures her opponent that there is no love “pon street,” and she will physically assault her. Of course, the lyrics are figurative, and are part of a long tradition of competitive rivalry and braggadocio that has animated many Afrological forms including hip-hop. Nonetheless, these lines are perhaps the closest she comes to articulating gangsta-like lyrics. The

use of patois in these grittier lyrics recalls “Jamaican posses” and helps to articulate the “bahd gyal” image that she was cultivating and would explore further later in her career.

“Elements of Style,” “Run For Cover,” “Victory is Calling,” and “On This Mic” are important early examples of Michie Mee’s articulation of a hybrid identity in her music. Her 1991 debut LP *Jamaican Funk – Canadian Style* continues her unique fusion of rap and reggae as a stylistic departure from then-common rap trends and a strategy to express Canadian and Jamaican identities on record and on screen.

CHAPTER 5: JAMAICAN FUNK – CANADIAN STYLE

The considerable artistic (if only moderate commercial) success of the singles “Victory is Calling” and “On this Mic,” led First Priority Music to release a full LP by Michie Mee and L.A. Luv in 1991. Titled *Jamaican Funk – Canadian Style*, the LP was a mixture of hip-hop and reggae. Michie Mee recalls:

One side was hip-hop, one side was reggae [...] the album was produced by Mikey Bennett and two friends in Jamaica and they did the reggae side, Steele and Cleve, I met Bobby Digital, there was so much people on the record that it was really *reggae*. But hip-hop made me who I am.¹⁶⁶

Twelve of its fifteen tracks contain either full verses or individual lines in patois; yet, only four songs feature reggae-style instrumentals. However, these tracks appear on the album’s first half, somewhat showcasing the reggae content. In addition, prominent reggae vocalists such as Shabba Ranks (“All Night Stand”), Patra, (“If They Only Knew,” “All Night Stand,”) and Pinchers (“Kotch”) appear on the LP, furthering the reggae content. Shabba Ranks and Patra soon broke into the North American market, especially Ranks who enjoyed commercial success through such songs as “Housecall” with Maxi Priest, sending his debut LP, *Raw as Ever*, to number one on the *Billboard* R&B album chart.¹⁶⁷

In retrospect, Michie Mee played an important role in dancehall reggae’s 1990s commercial success in North America. She may not have had a major hit record in the U.S. market, but through her recordings with BDP and First Priority Music she contributed to the initial wave of reggae-tinged hip-hop that helped bridge the gulf that existed between dancehall reggae and North American popular music. Shabba Ranks, who would go on to collaborate with

¹⁶⁶ “Royalty Radio: Michie Mee Interview.”

¹⁶⁷ “Shabba Ranks.” *Billboard Magazine*, accessed June 7, 2015, <http://www.billboard.com/artist/278794/shabba-ranks/biography>.

KRS-One in 1992 (on “The Jam”), came to enjoy considerable commercial success in North America, and laid the groundwork for the success of subsequent performers such as Shaggy and Sean Paul.¹⁶⁸

Michie Mee could have recorded her reggae-style tracks in Canada, but it is likely that the decision was not purely stylistic. Recording in Jamaica added authenticity to the Jamaican elements of the performance persona she was constructing and provided her with the opportunity to incorporate up-and-coming dancehall artists into her music. Nearly a decade later, Toronto’s Kardinal Offishall and Baby Blue Soundcrew would recruit Sean Paul for their 2000 hit, “Money Jane” for much the same reason. These examples point to Canada’s involvement in bringing dancehall to the commercial sphere. Moreover, they underscore Toronto’s importance within what Paul Gilroy has described as the “Black Atlantic,” the continuous circulation of African-diasporic peoples and culture around the globe.

The in-house producers at Beat Factory, most notably Maximum 60 (Richard Rodwell) and Michie Mee’s DJ, L.A. Luv, produced the majority of the hip-hop style beats on *Jamaican Funk – Canadian Style*. Five of the album’s fifteen tracks comprise of hip-hop beats and no patois. In these songs, she provides little evidence that she is Jamaican. But she does make numerous claims of allegiance to Toronto and Canada. Indeed, three song titles on *Jamaican Funk – Canadian Style* reference her identity as a Canadian: “A Portion From Up North, and “Canada Large.”

¹⁶⁸ There were other Canadian connections as well: Snow (Darren O’Brien), a Toronto-based white reggae vocalist, enjoyed major success with “Informer” (1992).

“Canada Large” (First Priority Music, 1991)

“Canada Large” was not released as a single; however, it is significant for its numerous references to Jamaican culture, specific Toronto neighbourhoods, and surrounding cities.

Michie Mee begins the song with the following lines:

Step up you wanna know where I come from?
 Canada is where I conceived the vibe for this album
 Michie Mee and L.A. Luv we’re not drawin’ a cyard¹⁶⁹ but yo...
 Canada large!

This short four-bar verse sets the stage for the song’s lyrical content. “Large” in this context (pronounced “Lawdge” with a Jamaican patois accent) is a Jamaican term that denotes power or popularity.

“Canada Large” also contains numerous references to Jamaican culture and specific Toronto locales. She names the outlying communities of Mississauga, Thornhill, Brampton, Markham, and Scarborough as well as specific Toronto neighbourhoods such as Regent Park, Jane and Finch, and “Jungle” (Lawrence Heights). By naming Toronto suburbs and locales, she identifies her affiliation and allegiance to the city and its citizens. It is important to note her use of “Jungle” when referring to Lawrence Heights. This type of insider information acts as cultural capital to those who are from the neighbourhood or are familiar with it, as only someone from Toronto would likely be acquainted with its nickname.

The lyrics also include the lines:

Jamaican born, me and my DJ steppin’ on the scene
 You’ve been warned, you didn’t know before talent comes in all forms

 Some claim we try to imitate many Americans
 But like a true Canadian I know I can I know I can

¹⁶⁹ Draw card: to trick or mislead.

Be original and mashup de dance
And many after me will have that same chance

Michie reminds her listeners of her birthplace and mentions her Canadian citizenry. She declares that she and L.A. Luv are not merely mimicking their competition to the south, affirming once again Edward Said's notion that part of identity formation (whether as a nation, culture, or individual) is defining what you are not (in relation to "another, different and competing alter-ego"¹⁷⁰), just as much as what you are. In Michie Mee's case, part of what enabled her to construct and perform a hybridized Canadian/Jamaican identity, was her refusal to be identified as American. She goes on to claim that she will "mashup de dance," patois for a successful performance or pleasing the audience. Thus, the lyrics on "Canada Large" demonstrate her ease with code-switching in her articulation of a dual national identity.

At one point in the song, a female voice (perhaps Michie Mee's), imitates a stereotypically "Canadian" voice, which would not be out of place on Canadian satirical television programs such as "SCTV," or "This Hour Has 22 Minutes":

You're gettin' kinda large, eh? How come?

The "r" in large receives a hard pronunciation, rather than a soft "r," as would be pronounced with a Jamaican accent ("lawdge"). In addition, the statement is punctuated once again with a common habit of native-Canadian speakers, the placement of the rhetorical "eh?" at the end of a sentence. The voice then asks "how come?" The use of such an accent is clearly a marker of "Canadian-ness" but it is also performed with a self-deprecating sense of humour, one that perhaps only fellow Canadians would appreciate. "Canada Large" does not contain musical or lyrical styles that could be identified as distinctly Canadian; however, her performance of the

¹⁷⁰ Edward Said, *Orientalism* (London: Penguin, 1978), 332.

stereotypical Canadian accent, combined with specifically naming Toronto neighbourhoods and bordering communities, articulate a Canadian identity.

“Jamaican Funk – Canadian Style”

The title track on *Jamaican Funk – Canadian Style* is essentially a remix of a previous version, simply entitled “Jamaican Funk” that was originally released as a single in 1990. Produced by First Priority artist King of Chill, the original version of “Jamaican Funk” is more up-tempo (105 bpm) than “Jamaican Funk – Canadian Style”¹⁷¹ and contains different instrumentation. “Jamaican Funk” is driven by a looped bassline (credited to Cold Blood, a 1970s funk band) that is accented by a drum pattern consisting of a kick, snare, closed hi-hat, and open hi-hat. The music does not contain any overt dancehall reggae influences, although Michie Mee breaks into several bars of patois at various points. Significantly, the single’s b-side “All Night Stand” is a reggae song that was recorded in Kingston, Jamaica. Produced by Mike Bennett, the track features background vocals by then rising reggae superstars Shabba Ranks and Patra. The groove consists of a bubbling digital bassline and drums that detour from dancehall’s standard rhythms. If this were the first track a listener experienced by Michie Mee, they would assume she was a reggae artist, not a hip-hop performer. The instrumentation, performed by well-established reggae musicians Steele and Cleve, is that of a typical reggae band. Michie’s verses are performed entirely in patois, and her guest vocalists are reggae artists. “All Night Stand” was included on *Jamaican Funk—Canadian Style*, perhaps for its overtly Jamaican character, thereby emphasizing Michie Mee’s Jamaican heritage and hybrid identity.

¹⁷¹ “Jamaican Funk – Canadian Style” is the second song on the LP of the same name. “Jamaican Funk” is listed as a bonus track found on the CD version only.

At 92 bpm “Jamaican Funk – Canadian Style” is considerably slower in tempo than the original recording, and the backing track is comprised of entirely different samples. A drum loop from James Brown’s “Funky Drummer” (1970) blended with a bassline sample from Earth Wind and Fire’s “Fan the Fire (1971) comprises the backing track’s foundation. In addition, short one-bar breaks precede each chorus. Unlike “On This Mic” which features a switch from a hip-hop beat to a dancehall-style beat to accompany Michie Mee’s Jamaican patois, the bassline simply drops out at various points, leaving the “Funky Drummer” drum break to continue.

Lyrically, “Jamaican Funk—Canadian Style” begins with guest male vocalists performing an off-key and somewhat humorous vocal interpretation of Stephen Bishop’s “On and On” (1976), an example of Henriques’ explanation of “conducting choir.” The group sings: “Down in Jamaica they’ve got lots of pretty women/ spend all your money/ and they, break your heart.” The introduction is a tongue-in-cheek nod to Michie Mee’s Jamaican background, her beauty, and her elusiveness as a love interest. However, in the lyrical content that follows, she positions herself as an independent and skilled lyricist:

I’m the Jamaican, taking charge and living large

It’s a shame there’s not a dame rough like this
When Michie’s on this mic, it’s ‘nuff niceness

Females are stale 'cause their look ain’t appealin’
When I rap brothers collapse some hit the ceiling
I gave him a wink, 'cause he was a hunk
More than sex appeal it’s Jamaican funk

Michie Mee claims her Jamaican identity and talks about being “in charge,” a motto she expresses to this day. She continues to express her strong Jamaican identity by using patois

(‘nuff niceness), and her identity as a heterosexual woman by asserting her attraction to (and attention from) men.

After eighteen bars of rapping, a brief chorus (four bars) features a repetition of the line “I’m the Jamaican.” In verse two, Michie expounds on Jamaican women’s ability to tame even the roughest of male suitors:

Jamaican women have the talent
To take a man for everything valid
Roughnecks they’ll [curse] you out in a minute
Sweet and sexy I’ve got a brain to go with it
Michie’s the perfect combination of a Jamaican woman
[Male voice] “Go ahead, baby”

These lines continue to construct a narrative concerning the singer’s identity as a Jamaican (Canadian) woman, but they reverse the gender roles commonly found in most dancehall and hip-hop lyrics: she states that Jamaican women will “play” the man, instead of the opposite. These lyrics further illustrate Michie Mee’s desire to present herself and her Jamaican identity as strong and not to be messed with, similar to her battle-style lyrics.

In verse two, Michie Mee provides another deft example of code-switching. Using Jamaican patois, she calls on the audience to raise their hands if they are Jamaican, an example of “commanding” (instructing the crowd to move in particular ways, as theorized by Henriques), as well as “excitement and control” (exciting or intensifying the musical experience for the crowd). Of course, the recording is not live, yet it simulates a live dancehall-esque concert setting:

Push up yu han if yu are Jamaican
Skin out yu back yu can tek the sun lang
Bawl it out cause yu a autical don
Jamaican woman yu hav fi fear, so ah
Jamaican sweet gal pickney
Dem dey girl they say dey dem have the whinery

Wha mek de man dem a run afta she
 Yu neva know sey she a yardie
 Men travel fa miles around they know what's in town
 Jamaican funk!

[Translation]

Raise your hand if you're Jamaican
 Bare your back you can take the sun long
 Shout it out because you are in charge
 Jamaican woman you have to fear
 Jamaican sweet gal pickney
 Those girls say they have the winery [dance]
 What makes the men run after her
 You didn't know that she is a "yardie"
 Men travel for miles around, they know what's in town
 Jamaican funk!

In addition to performing in patois, Michie Mee uses several other markers of Jamaican culture, notably the use of coded forms of Jamaican slang. For example, she uses the word "whine," which in Jamaica is a term used for a particular type of dance. She also uses the expressions "pinkney," and "yardie," for young girl and "rude boy/gal" respectively. In addition to the range of sonic and lyrical signifiers of Jamaican culture in the audio recording of "Jamaican Funk – Canadian Style," the music video for the piece uses a variety of coded visual signifiers.

"Jamaican Funk – Canadian Style" Video

In "The Aesthetics of Music Videos," Paulo Peverini suggests that, "even if we can't classify the nature of every single image, we can at least identify a visual continuum concerning the ways in which a star is (re)presented."¹⁷² Simply put, it is possible to make sense of cultural signifiers if patterns emerge or when a particular idea or theme is emphasized through repetition.

¹⁷² Paulo Peverini, "The Aesthetics of Music Videos: An Open Debate" in *Rewind, Play, Fastforward*, 141.

Peverini's analytical methodology draws from semiology, theorizing "a strategic space where a reader's interpretative skills are practiced." He continues: "To capture the attention of the fans, music videos are located at the center of this intricate net. At the core of this complex mechanism we detect the star, his image, his body. The performer's identity is at the same time an instrument and the target of the audience's interpretative effort."¹⁷³ For the average viewer of music videos, intended messages are more easily understood when patterns—images, colours, lyrics, and characters—are reprised throughout the video.

In *Dancing in the Distraction Factory: Music Television and Popular Culture*, Andrew Goodwin stresses the importance of recognizing the commercial function of a music video.¹⁷⁴ For a video to be successful, it needs to convey a particular emotion, feeling, or impression that the artist is attempting to bring forth. Images aligned with the music are not pure happenstance. This may be an obvious point, but many viewers do not spend much time considering the motives for why or how the musician or music video director has chosen particular imagery or visual narratives for a video. The right combination of camera shots (close-ups, mid-range shots, long range shots), edits, colour palettes, props, costumes, narratives, and numerous other storytelling devices maximize the video's promotional potential. Well-constructed music videos successfully employ these filmic strategies, thereby enhancing the viewer's experience, and, importantly, communicating the performer's intended aesthetic goals. As Peverini reminds us,

¹⁷³ Peverini, "The Aesthetics of Music Videos: An Open Debate," 140.

¹⁷⁴ Andrew Goodwin, *Dancing in the Distraction Factory: Music Television and Popular Culture*, (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1992), 74.

the video is not just helping sell a product; it is selling the artist, and possibly forging the star's mythology,¹⁷⁵ increasing the chance of future sales.

What are useful strategies to deconstruct a music video to determine whether it is successful in communicating a desired message? In "An Analysis of the Relation Between Music and Image," Giulia Gabrielli draws on the work of Michel Chion to provide a framework to better understand how images and music function to create meaning when they are merged in music videos. Gabrielli outlines what she refers to as "the five functions of the image" in relation to the music:

1 – Paraphrase the verbal text of the song

This is the most basic, and perhaps obvious use of video. The images may explicitly follow the song lyrics; however, if the words are somewhat abstract, this may be harder to achieve.

Gabrielli suggests that images can reflect the song lyrics, or the song title can suggest a theme or mood.¹⁷⁶

2 – Facilitating the comprehension of the lyrics

A literal translation of the song lyrics (words on screen).

3 – Creating a further reading perspective of the song

Gabrielli suggests that music videos that lack lyrics are the most common area of this form as the director is not constrained by the words and has the freedom to create narratives "independently from the content of the text."¹⁷⁷

4 – Direct the expression of the song by creating a specific, guiding atmosphere

¹⁷⁵ Peverini, "The Aesthetics of Music Videos," 143.

¹⁷⁶ Giulia Gabrielli, "An Analysis of the Relationship Between Music and Image. The Contribution of Michel Gondry," in *Rewind, Play, Fastforward*, 91-92.

¹⁷⁷ Ibid., 92.

This is perhaps the most common utility of music video imagery. The imagery can direct the viewer's emotion, and provide what Chion describes as "added value," a symbiotic nature between music and text in which they complement and give extra meaning to the other.¹⁷⁸

5 – Create matches with given parts of the song

Gabrielli stresses this function of the image as the most important of all. While some music/image pairings may be obvious, such as the seemingly synchronous pairing of a guitar being strummed with the sound of a guitar chord, other music/image combinations may have no obvious connection. In such cases, the viewer may still experience powerful, yet subjective, connections based on their own experiences. The concept of "syncretism," explains Chion, is the "inevitable and spontaneous joint between a sound and a punctual visual phenomenon when these occur simultaneously, regardless of any logic."¹⁷⁹ There are rarely "accidents" in the filming and editing process. Indeed, the final product is the end point of a laborious creative project. But the viewer may draw meaning from music/image pairings that are quite independent from the director's intentions. Nonetheless, the intentional replication of themes, colours, or image/music combinations can create "visual leitmotifs" that "enable the spectator to recognize the development of specific images as matching specific musical developments, and they also create expectations."¹⁸⁰

The video for "Jamaican Funk – Canadian Style" was shot entirely indoors in what appears to be a sound stage. A large portion of the video features Michie Mee and L.A. Luv performing on a raised stage in front of a small audience. Black, green, gold, and red dominate

¹⁷⁸ Michel Chion, *L'audio-vision: Son et image au cinema*, (Paris: Nathan, 1997), 12.

¹⁷⁹ Chion, *L'audio-vision*, 55-58.

¹⁸⁰ Gabrielli, "An Analysis of the Relationship Between Music and Image," 96.

the visual colour palette, primarily due to a towering painted backdrop that depicts abstract images of female figures. The artwork presents both African and graffiti sensibilities, the latter somewhat reminiscent of Keith Haring's work. The video's mood is celebratory. Numerous clips show Michie Mee's two male dancers engaged in a dance routine. Other clips show children dancing, jumping up and down, and her audience waving their hands or moving to the music.

As the song title suggests, Jamaican culture (more specifically dancehall reggae culture) is prominently displayed throughout the video. On stage behind Michie Mee, L.A. Luv performs on turntables that sit atop a table. Turntables are a key element of both sound system and hip-hop culture. Curiously, the DJ has largely disappeared from contemporary hip-hop videos as rappers have received more and more of the spotlight over the last twenty-five years. Except for an opening scene that shows a mid-shot of L.A. Luv staring into the camera, he stands behind his Technics 1200s for the video's remainder. Even though the duo received equal billing as "Michie Mee and L.A. Luv," it is clear that Michie Mee is the star and focal point. Nonetheless, L.A. Luv's constant presence behind the turntables underscores the significant role that DJs and selectors play in hip-hop and dancehall culture, respectively. In addition, a Jamaican flag hangs prominently in front of his turntables. The flag's primary colours (black, green, and gold) match the overarching colour scheme of the visuals. The other prominent colour is red, which is seen mostly in the large artwork, Michie Mee's clothing and that of the dancers and video extras. Red may not be in the Jamaican flag, but it is a significant colour in Rastafarian symbolism. It is common for pictures of former Ethiopian King Haile Selassie and male lions—typical Rastafarian iconography—to be surrounded by green, red, and gold. Michie Mee is not known to practice Rastafarianism; however, the inclusion of red is significant insofar as it provides a

further signification of Jamaican and African diasporic culture. The video's thematic colour scheme creates a visual leitmotiv as theorized by Chion and Gabrielli.

Michie Mee dons several outfits throughout the video, but she is primarily seen in clothing inspired by dancehall reggae and “dancehall queen” fashion. There are two separate sequences as she and L.A. Luv perform in front of their audience. For these sequences, she is dressed in a dancehall-themed outfit comprised of a jean jacket and matching shorts adorned with large red frills (perhaps a lace fabric) around the shoulders and on the cuffs of her shorts. She also wears knee-high red boots. Her hair resembles the elaborate hairstyles of dancehall queens, with large curls and a wide blonde streak. She also wears chunky gold jewelry in the form of bracelets, a chain necklace, and earrings (also popular among female rappers of the late 1980s and early 1990s such as MC Lyte and Roxanne Shante). She is dressed somewhat more modestly than most dancehall queens, but dancehall fashion clearly inspires her outfit. In addition to the dancehall fashion, Michie Mee is shown in a white and pink sweatsuit, a red dress and heels, and a white jean jacket decorated with silver trim. In combination, these sartorial elements constitute a prime example of the video's articulation of Michie Mee's hybridized identity that is equal parts Jamaican, Canadian, and hip-hop.

Figure 5.1 (a-c) Still images from Michie Mee and L.A. Luv's “Jamaican Funk – Canadian Style,”¹⁸¹ depicting Michie Mee's “dancehall queen” fashion and the black, green, and gold colour palette. Both serve to create a visual leitmotiv that promotes Jamaican sensibilities.

¹⁸¹ Michie Mee and DJ L.A. Luv, “Jamaican Funk – Canadian Style,” (music video, director unknown),

Likewise, L.A. Luv wears three different outfits in the video. The first is a black jacket with horizontal red, green, and gold stripes and “La Luv” sewn into the jacket’s left breast. His second outfit is comprised of a light blue denim jacket with a black hooded sweatshirt underneath – the hood pulled up over a Los Angeles Dodgers baseball cap (“L.A.,” presumably for L.A. Luv in this context). Third is a black athletic jacket with gold trim and a custom-looking gold heart with the letters “L.A.” emblazoned on his chest. The black, red, green, and gold colours in his outfits match the video’s visual colour palette, but none of his outfits appear to be inspired by dancehall fashion. The third outfit resembles the custom-made sweatsuits that Harlem designer Daniel Day (also known as “Dapper Dan”) created for New York hip-hop artists and hustlers around the time. The black and gold jacket maintains the video’s established colour palette while clearly signifying hip-hop sartorial sensibilities.

Figure 5.2 (a-c) Still images from Michie Mee and L.A. Luv’s “Jamaican Funk – Canadian Style,”¹⁸² depicting DJ L.A. Luv wearing typical hip-hop fashion; a features a black, green, red, and gold colour scheme, matching the backdrop’s colour palette.

The video for “Jamaican Funk – Canadian Style,” like the LP of the same name, is rich with cultural signifiers of Jamaican dancehall culture and hip-hop culture. The project combines reggae-styled instrumentation with hip-hop beats, dancehall reggae artists with hip-hop

posted on August 7, 2010, accessed April 30, 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ObqLwv7UtP8>.

¹⁸² Michie Mee and DJ L.A. Luv, “Jamaican Funk – Canadian Style,” (music video).

producers and a hip-hop DJ, and Canadian English with plenty of Jamaican patois. Michie Mee explicitly and repeatedly references Canada, Toronto, and the fact that she is not simply “an American clone,” but a Canadian performer with a distinct hybrid identity and musical style. The songs “Jamaican Funk – Canadian Style,” “Canada Large,” “We’ve Arrived in America,” and “A Portion From Up North” provide further evidence of her desire to carve out a unique identity for herself within the highly competitive hip-hop industry. Michie Mee would continue to experiment with her identity as an artist, particularly in her work with Raggadeath and her solo album *The First Cut is the Deepest* from the year 2000.

CHAPTER 6: MICHIE MEE – 1992-2000

The year 1992 was a transitional year for hip-hop. Dr. Dre's seminal LP *The Chronic* blended gangster imagery with a clean-sounding production value that appealed to hip-hop fans and found its way into the mainstream. The LP “quickly hit a million units in sales on its way to an eventual triple-platinum certification.”¹⁸³ *The Chronic* was not unique for its sales—MC Hammer's *Please Hammer Don't Hurt 'em* sold ten million copies two years prior. Nor was its focus on inner city life particularly new: through the work of artists including Schoolly D, Boogie Down Productions, Ice-T, and Dr. Dre's former group N.W.A., “gangsta” themes were well-trodden territory by 1992. What set the album apart was the combination of gangster themes and an accessible mainstream sensibility.¹⁸⁴ *The Chronic*'s mainstream success alerted major record companies to the commercial viability of gangster rap.

The 1990s saw an increase in similar releases as mainstream audiences helped rappers such as 2pac, Notorious B.I.G., and Jay-Z enjoy record sales topping *The Chronic*, while balancing the difficult act of appealing to both hardcore hip-hop fans and the mainstream audience. The decade also saw the rise of blending R&B with hip-hop beats. Whereas in the 1980s, when most R&B singers shunned rap as a fad, a generation of young R&B vocalists were raised with hip-hop culture and began to fuse rap-style breakbeats into their music and hip-hop fashion in their imagery. Artists such as Jodeci, Mary J. Blige, R. Kelly, TLC and Aaliyah all enjoyed multi-platinum success, by blending R&B with hip-hop sensibilities, musically, and sartorially. Record companies marketed the music as “urban” thus appealing to the ever-

¹⁸³ Dan Charnas, *The Big Payback* (New York: New American Library, 2010), 402.

¹⁸⁴ At the time of *The Chronic*'s release, MC Hammer's *Please Hammer Don't Hurt 'em*, and Vanilla Ice's *To the Extreme* were the two highest-selling rap albums of all time.

important hip-hop and mainstream audiences. With larger record sales come increased budgets for the record companies to promote their signees. As a result, glitzy videos with million-dollar budgets began to air on MTV, BET, and MuchMusic. Videos by Missy Elliott, Puff Daddy, and others featured elaborate costuming, exotic locales, and at times, special effects. How then would Michie Mee, one of old school hip-hop's pioneering MCs, fit into hip-hop's changing musical and economic landscape?

Throughout the 1990s and into the 2000s, Michie Mee continued to expand her involvement in the entertainment industry. She took up acting, appearing in numerous films and television programs such as "Da Kink in My Hair," the CBC's hip-hop inspired "Drop the Beat," *In Too Deep*, and *Chicks With Sticks*. Additionally, she co-hosted CKLN's "The Power Move Show"¹⁸⁵ with DJ X. She also fronted a hybrid reggae/rock band called Raggadeath.

Raggadeath

Michie Mee first ventured into rock 'n roll with several friends who shared similar musical tastes. "Your friends have a huge effect on your musical influences," she recounts, "and the guys I hung out with, they had apartments and worked at bars all along Queen West."¹⁸⁶ She was soon invited to audition for a band her colleagues had formed:

A lot of the people that I grew up with in terms of downtown Toronto was rock guys, Planet X rock record shops [...] my old [bass]player says, "we're doing a new record, we auditioned a bunch of guys and why don't you come down and see what you can do," and I managed to knock the fellas out, you know what I mean? It worked out so I could be on

¹⁸⁵ "Bio," Michie Mee, accessed November 2, 2014, <http://michiemee.com/bio/>.

¹⁸⁶ Sarah Liss, "What Do You Say, Michie Mee?" accessed April 21, 2015. <http://hcconsultingonline.com/website/wp-content/uploads/2013/11/Stylus-2012.pdf>

the first single, and then the second single and then it came to be the third single, by the time I knew it we were ready to do an EP and two albums.¹⁸⁷

Raggadeath, as the band came to be known, fused heavy metal with reggae. Although Raggadeath began recording as early as 1991,¹⁸⁸ the band did not officially release their music until 1995. Their first official recording, *The Family Worship EP* (1995), was released by the independent label Fringe Records, notable for distributing well-known punk rock acts such as Dead Kennedy's, Dirty Rotten Imbeciles, and Black Flag. Two albums followed, *Why Ask Why* (1995), and *Raggadeath* (1997).

The band featured several vocalists, and according to bassist and producer Walter Sobczak, who had formerly worked as a recording engineer for Michie Mee, credits Toronto's environment as influencing the band's international sound. He emphasized, "you can't separate the environment from the writing, [...] it's probably the most multi-cultural city in the world. Toronto's like a microcosm of the world, if you look at the elements of Raggadeath we're like a microcosm of Toronto."¹⁸⁹ Moreover, Sobczak credited the city's Jamaican population for directing the band's sound.¹⁹⁰ In other words, Raggadeath's distinct reggae/metal style may not have required Michie Mee; however, her inclusion certainly helped solidify their sound and image. Raggadeath also allowed Michie Mee to expand her already considerable level of creative mobility even further, providing an outlet for her to explore new musical territory, while continuing to combine Jamaican and Canadian sensibilities as she had done since the start of her career.

¹⁸⁷ "Royalty Radio: Michie Mee Interview."

¹⁸⁸ Ibid.

¹⁸⁹ Carey Weinberg, "Raggadeath Funk With the Genres," *The Gazette*, posted October 24, 1997, accessed May 20, 2015, <http://www.usc.uwo.ca/gazette/1997/October/24/Entertainment1.htm>.

¹⁹⁰ Ibid.

While heavy metal largely informed Raggadeath's music, the band incorporated reggae and hip-hop into the mix to create a distinct hybrid musical style. For example, "One Life to Live," from the group's debut EP, features heavy guitar, Michie Mee rapping and singing in patois, and hip-hop break beats¹⁹¹ as the song's rhythmic base. Michie Mee makes further nods to hip-hop by quoting well-known rap lyrics, notably Mobb Deep's introductory line from "Shook Ones, Part II": "I got you stuck off the realness." However, she modifies the line to "I got you stuck off *my* realness," before coupling it with "now raise your hands if you can feel this." On *Raggadeath* (1997), many songs with fast tempos and plenty of heavy metal guitar still feature reggae-style singing and/or popular hip-hop break beats. One such example is the band's cover of Eddy Grant's "Electric Avenue." Other tracks, such as "Old School," are more reminiscent of roots reggae, featuring slower tempos. Throughout the band's history, several members shared the vocal duties; however, the songs that were selected for video production such as "Why Ask Why" and "Dance With the Devil" largely featured Michie Mee. Her visual and vocal presence in the band's videos may suggest she is the band's leader, although the band's principal songwriters were Walter Sobczak and drummer/producer Stephen Kendall.¹⁹²

Michie Mee's presence in Raggadeath provided the band with a vocalist that had already established herself within the music industry, and also contributed important cultural capital in the form of her Jamaican/Canadian identity. Her presence certainly helped affirm their rock/reggae image. In return, Raggadeath provided Michie Mee with a platform through which she could continue to articulate her Jamaican Canadian identity albeit in a different manner than

¹⁹¹ Melvin Bliss "Synthetic Substitution" (Sunburst, 1973), and The Honeydrippers "Impeach the President" (Alaga, 1973), respectively.

¹⁹² Weinberg, "Raggadeath Funk With the Genres."

on her earlier recordings. In addition, her touring schedule with Raggadeath exposed her work to an audience that was largely unfamiliar with her work as a rapper, thus garnering her previous work more attention. Finally, the band's success—and its very existence—provides further evidence of Toronto's status as a dynamic multicultural and diasporic city.

***The First Cut is the Deepest* (Koch, 2000)**

After an EP, two LPs, and a heavy touring schedule with Raggadeath, Michie Mee returned to the studio to record a second full-length hip-hop album. She had since parted ways with First Priority Music and created Track and Field Entertainment with national distribution by Koch Records. Her production team had also changed, except for DJ X, her “Power Move” radio show co-host. Both hip-hop and mainstream pop had changed considerably in the intervening years and *The First Cut* reflects the shift. The most striking difference between *Jamaican Funk – Canadian Style* and *The First Cut* is the difference in musical direction. Where Michie Mee had earlier sought to create a unique album that would be equal parts reggae and rap, *The First Cut* sounded much more akin to its contemporaries with beats and a rapping style or “flow” common to the era. In the extremely competitive world of popular music, her sophomore rap LP did not stand out among its contemporaries to the same degree as *Jamaican Funk – Canadian Style*.

The First Cut is the Deepest features relatively few nods to dancehall reggae, patois lyrics, or to Jamaica. Admittedly, some Jamaican referents may go undetected by listeners, such as myself, who are not native patois speakers. However, as a hip-hop DJ and producer, I can confidently assert that the beats and drum patterns on *The First Cut* are decidedly evocative of late 1990s/early 2000s hip-hop. Certain rhythms, such as those featured on the track “Ripped Mee Off,” follow a standard “boom-bap” format, with the kick drum emphasizing the first (and often third) beat of each measure coupled with snare drums falling on the second and fourth

beats. Other beats, such as those on “I’ll Call You” and “Free,” are reminiscent of producer Timbaland’s work, which helped alter the aural landscape of late-1990s hip-hop and R&B—and, by extension, Top 40 music—with his sparse, sample-free, and unpredictable instrumentation for the likes of Missy Elliott, Ginuwine, and Jay-Z, among others.

“Cover Girl” has a decidedly R&B/pop sound that may have resulted from a desire to attract a larger portion of the mainstream audience. Initially released on *Rap Essentials Vol. 2* (1997), “Cover Girl” appears again on *The First Cut is the Deepest*. However, it features a different musical arrangement based on a loop sampled from the Spinner’s 1973 hit “I’ll Be Around.”¹⁹³ This sample provides a lighter, more “radio-friendly” feel. Sampling The Spinners’ hit may have been a strategic act on Michie Mee’s (and/or her producer’s) part to help construct a mainstream sound with the hope of greater exposure. In addition, a video for “Cover Girl” appeared in regular rotation on MuchMusic.

The song consists of several hallmarks of late 1990s mainstream hip-hop: a familiar sample, a sung chorus, and a video containing dancing in or outside of a club. These factors may have come to be cliché, but the music industry, like other forms of mass media entertainment, tends to follow what is currently popular to vie in an extremely competitive market. While “Cover Girl” strays from the reggae/rap hybrid that Michie Mee helped pioneer, she does manage to articulate her Jamaican heritage within the song and video. For example, she references Tenor Saws’ “Ring the Alarm,” uses the Jamaican expression “big-up,” and repeats the phrase “I’m the Jamaican, takin’ charge” (the first line in “Jamaican Funk”) after the second chorus. Furthermore, she raps in the braggadocious manner that she is known for with lines such as:

¹⁹³ Or perhaps an interpolation of The Spinners’ record.

On official rap business, who wanna test me

Got a sista shakin', S&M, I do the spankin'

I've got many styles; I'm versatile like this

I'll slow it down, bounce it all around

Pass me the water and that mic 'cause Michie's hot

While these examples are not as pointed as some of the battle-inspired lyrics of her earlier records, they suggest that Michie Mee has not forgotten her battle roots. The title "Cover Girl" raises questions concerning the song's gender politics. The chorus, sung by Chris Rouse, emphasizes the importance of a positive body image and confidence:

You're a cover girl anywhere you are
 You got to be strong, [Michie – taking charge]
 Don't you ever question [Michie – taking charge]
 Can't nobody tell you who you are
 It's all up to you, everybody listen

The video for "Cover Girl" provides further evidence of Michie Mee's change in artistic direction. Unlike "Jamaican Funk – Canadian Style," the colour palette in the video for "Cover Girl" does not connote Jamaican culture. Gone are the prominent greens, blacks, golds, and reds. In their place, a variety of colours in combination with the bright lighting and dancing provide a more party-like atmosphere, reminiscent of many late 1990s' hip-hop videos.

Figure 6.1 (a-e) Still images from Michie Mee’s “Cover Girl,”¹⁹⁴ and Notorious B.I.G.’s “Mo Money Mo Problems” featuring Puff Daddy and Mase.¹⁹⁵

Newcomers to Michie Mee’s music would be hard-pressed to know about her dual national/cultural identification from “Cover Girl” alone. Whether this was a decision by Michie Mee, her record label, or a combination thereof is unclear; however, the lyrics of another track on *First Cut* suggest that she was pushing against considerable industry pressure.

“Don’t Wanna Be Your Slave” featuring Esthero (Track and Field/Koch, 1999)

The Juno-nominated track “Don’t Wanna Be Your Slave,” produced by Jon Levine and David Carty, contains a slow tempo by hip-hop standards (65 bpm). This is likely due in part to the fact that the piece samples the Rolling Stones’ “Slave,” which has a similarly slow tempo. The guitar melody and vocal chorus are primarily the same as the original; however, Michie Mee performs freshly written vocals in the verses. The song appears to be Michie’s way of challenging pressures placed on her by the music industry to alter her sound and image to conform to industry standards. For example, the track includes the following lyrics from the Rolling Stones’ original version: “Do it and do it and do it and do it and do it / Don’t wanna be

¹⁹⁴ Michie Mee, “Cover Girl,” (music video, directed by David Cropper), posted February 8, 2010 accessed June 22, 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2oxyihX6m3A>.

¹⁹⁵ Notorious B.I.G. “Mo Money Mo Problems” feat. Puff Daddy and Mase, (music video, directed by Hype Williams), posted September 6, 2011, accessed May 24, 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gUhRKVIjJtw>.

your slave.” To these lyrics, Michie Mee adds: And I’m not gonna cry victim / And I’m not gonna blame the victim.” She goes on to boldly declare that she will not be molded according to the whims of others:

I ain’t going to take it how you wanna

Ain’t no puppet on a string
Like some hoes suckin’ on your thing
Overworked and underpaid for days
Behave? I’m not gonna be your slave

People still taking life for a joke¹⁹⁶
Can’t see the fire but you blow a lot of smoke
If you didn’t get it, you got what you deserved
And just like that, that’s my word
Everyday I wake up, schemin’ on a come up
No daydreaming, gotta stay one up
How you gonna sit back, and wait on the wealth
Gotta go get it, motivate yourself
If not, you’re only perpetrating yourself
And at the end of the day, you’d only hate yourself
If you know me you know my motto, “taking charge”
I got what it takes to make it, make it large

This verse provides insight into the message Michie Mee attempts to convey in “Don’t Wanna Be Your Slave.” She wants to be self-reliant and to attain her dreams without bending to unsavoury industry demands. Additionally, she expresses her disdain over the perceived reconstruction of her image as an artist.

It could be argued that by remaking a popular Rolling Stones piece, she was already pandering to a pop or rock audience, despite her intentions to the contrary. However, given the history and legacy of slavery, the lyrics and title of the piece carry a very different connotation

¹⁹⁶ References KRS-One in the Boogie Down Productions track “I’m Still #1” – “People still taking rapping for a joke, a passing hope, or a phase with a rope.”

when they are performed by a Jamaican Canadian woman of colour than they do when performed by a group of privileged (and extraordinarily wealthy) British men. Moreover, Michie Mee had already recorded several rock songs as a member of Raggadeath, so her move into this territory is not unprecedented.

Much like the video for “Cover Girl,” the video for “Don’t Wanna Be Your Slave” does not feature any explicit referents to Jamaican or Canadian culture. The video’s colour palette is predominantly black and white with a blue background appearing in the shots that feature Michie Mee rapping in front of a microphone stand. Red is the only other colour that appears, albeit briefly when the words of the chorus appear on screen, alternating in white and red.

The video begins with a man bursting through a door and saying to someone off camera, “Yo, do you see what they got you wearin’?”. He then proceeds to laugh and shuts the door. Several women are then portrayed in a variety of stages of dress, most of them looking unsure of themselves as they prepare for the video shoot. At the forty-second mark, Michie Mee appears out of a room marked “Hair Makeup Wardrobe.” She pauses and then proceeds down the hallway. Within the track, a male voice states, “Gotta make that money, man. Make your money, yo. Just do what you gotta do.” Throughout the majority of the video, Michie Mee dons a variety of outfits designed to amplify her sex appeal. They include a crop top exposing her midriff, zebra-striped jacket and leather pants, high-heel boots, sheer tops, and her hair fashioned in a variety of ways. Michie’s backup dancers also wear shorts, crop tops, and dance in a sexually suggestive manner. One of her outfits, a white cowboy hat with matching tasseled jacket and bra top is extremely similar to an outfit worn by model Gloria Velez in the video for Jay-Z’s “Big Pimpin’.” As the lyrics in “Don’t Wanna Be Your Slave” directly challenge industry standards, Michie Mee’s cowgirl outfit in the video seemingly satirizes and criticizes

representations of women in Jay-Z’s video and other hip-hop videos of the time. Although the similarity in clothing could be a coincidence, it speaks to the popularity of the hyper-sexual imagery displayed in mainstream hip-hop videos common in the late 1990s/early 2000s, and the pressures to which women musicians, dancers, and models were—and continue to be—subjected. Crucially, the visual narrative in the video for “Don’t Wanna Be Your Slave” challenges this pattern of oppression, much like the piece’s lyrics.

Figure 6.2 (a-e) Still images from Michie Mee’s “Don’t Wanna Be Your Slave.”¹⁹⁷

Figure 6.3 (f) Still image from Jay-Z’s “Big Pimpin’” feat. UGK, directed by Hype Williams, 2000.

Overall, the song and video articulate a defiant stance in opposition to industry pressures that would limit Michie Mee’s agency in an attempt to mold her into something she is not. From the start of her career, Michie Mee projected a strong, independent and self-assured image. One of the ways in which she did this early in her career was by incorporating signifiers of her

¹⁹⁷ Michie Mee, “Don’t Wanna Be Your Slave,” (music video, director unknown), posted February 8, 2010, accessed June 24, 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fbdffbd0T4s>.

Jamaican heritage and her Jamaican Canadian identity into her performance practice as a hip-hop MC. In contrast, “Cover Girl” and “Don’t Wanna Be Your Slave” do not reference Michie Mee’s Jamaican heritage, but nonetheless take direct aim at the societal and institutional power structures that work to limit her creative freedom as an artist. In some of her more recent work, Michie Mee has come full circle, once again drawing on her Jamaican musical and cultural heritage to create music that articulates an attitude of resistance.

CHAPTER 7: MICHIE MEE – “BAHDGYAL BUBBLE” (2012)

“Bahdgyal Bubble,” released in 2012, continues the rap/reggae hybrid style that Michie Mee helped pioneer in the mid-1980s, effectively articulating her dual national identity. Unlike many of her earlier recordings, which bear a more upbeat sound, “Bahdgyal Bubble” is somewhat sinister. Michie Mee raps approximately half of her vocals, which express an aggressive and defiant tone. In addition, the backing rhythm features a dancehall beat; therefore, the song could be categorized as a dancehall reggae track with some rapped verses, rather than a hip-hop track with reggae-style vocals (as was the case with “Run For Cover,” “On This Mic,” and “Jamaican Funk – Canadian Style”). Her vocals are more mature sounding; her vocal register is slightly lower, perhaps not surprisingly given the fact that “Bahdgyal Bubble” was released 22 years after “Jamaican Funk—Canadian Style.”

The most noticeable difference between her earlier work and “Bahdgyal Bubble” is the sense of anger and defiance in the 2012 track. “Bahdgyal Bubble” contains numerous barbs directed at unnamed critics, fair weather friends, record company executives, and rivals. However, she still references Toronto and Jamaica: “I’m from Jane, motherfuckers can’t explain / Why the Mich Mee stay in the game.” “Jane” is shorthand for Toronto’s Jane and Finch neighbourhood where she spent a portion of her childhood upon immigrating to Canada. The neighbourhood is also known for producing other well-known hip-hop acts such as the Dream Warriors. This explicit reference to Jane and Finch is significant, as it represents not just a specific locale in the city, but a location with a visible Jamaican immigrant population. Therefore, the reference provides an indication of her Jamaican and Canadian allegiances, articulating both a Jamaican and Toronto-based identity, without explicitly mentioning either geographical location.

On “Bahdgyal Bubble,” Michie Mee expresses her Jamaican identity in a manner not heard since 1991’s *Jamaican Funk – Canadian Style*. It seems likely that this shift was a response to the frustration that she, like many artists, feels due to limitations thrust upon her by the music industry. In 2013, Michie Mee participated in a York University presentation entitled “Performing Diaspora 2013 Hip Hop Practitioners” where she commented on some of the challenges she has faced because of her gender and her background as a Jamaican Canadian:

Very hard for me to convince anyone, even now or back then that I’m a writer, they don’t want the girls to write. When you get yourself included into the hip-hop game and so forth, there’s songwriters... so they apply in other genres like R&B to the hip-hop genre... ‘can she sing, can she do something else?’ because someone else wants to write and wants to make me a part of the machine, so to speak. So, ‘Jamaican, attitude, how do we curve it?’ Speaking reality but wanting to change my reality, so I don’t speak about my reality anymore. So therefore influencing the songwriting again, so can’t tell the story, can’t tell the truth, can’t tell things I’ve been through, can’t reflect on the Canadian society because America doesn’t know about Canada and therefore it’s not happening here.¹⁹⁸

From these comments, it is clear that at least one point in her career, Michie Mee was asked to tone down references to her cultural background and to the rap/reggae hybrid style she helped pioneer, likely in an effort to appeal to a more pop-oriented audience. In response, “Bahdgyal Bubble” contains lyrics that criticize the record companies that refused to accept her identity:

Don’t tell me to talk nice, stay pretty and it ain’t shitty
An OG¹⁹⁹ in the G-20 city

The late mid to late 1990s saw a rise in the number of short skirt and high heel wearing MCs such as Foxy Brown and Lil’ Kim—a noticeable departure from the track suit or African-

¹⁹⁸ The Harriet Tubman Institute, “Performing Diaspora 2013 Hip Hop Practitioners.”

¹⁹⁹ OG stands for “original gangster.” The term is now slang for someone who has participated in hip-hop for numerous years.

inspired clothing donned by MC Lyte and Queen Latifah a generation earlier. Both Foxy Brown and Lil' Kim rapped over beats that were more accessible to a pop audience, such as Lil' Kim's "Not Tonight" which borrowed liberally from Kool and the Gang's "Ladies Night." Michie Mee's *The First Cut is the Deepest* (2000) immediately followed these popular releases, so it is possible that she was asked to structure her music and image accordingly. With the success of Lil' Kim and Foxy Brown, record companies took notice, and promoted female MCs with a hypersexualized image, at least in the commercial arena (Nicki Minaj and Iggy Azalea are two more recent examples).

The words "staying pretty" do not necessarily refer to dressing Michie Mee in a hypersexualized fashion, representative of commercial hip-hop's ideal of black women.²⁰⁰ "Staying pretty" may also refer to the pop-oriented beats of contemporary mainstream hip-hop, regardless of the vocalist's gender. "Bahdgyal Bubble" strays far away from mainstream hip-hop. It possesses a stuttering dancehall rhythm, patois, and an overall vibe that is dark and menacing. Therefore, when Michie Mee refuses to "talk nice, stay pretty and it ain't shitty," she is taking charge of her music and image. If that means recording hardcore dancehall anthems and speaking about her "reality," as she disclosed on the York University panel, then that will be her unfiltered creative direction. The following line, "An OG in the G-20 city"²⁰¹ illustrates her role as a pioneer in Toronto's hip-hop scene (and Canada's hip-hop scene, for that matter) as well as her longevity in the music industry. Because the line is juxtaposed with her admonishment of the music industry, it provides further evidence of her frustration with record executives that seek to

²⁰⁰ Tricia Rose, *Black Noise*, 115.

²⁰¹ Toronto hosted the G-20 summit in 2010, one of a series of regular meetings between twenty nations to discuss global finance and economy.

mold her in a way that silences her “reality” as an artist and suppress the expression of her Jamaican identity.

“Bahdgyal Bubble” Video

The video for “Bahdgyal Bubble” begins with Michie Mee standing in the middle of a subway car, most likely a Toronto Transit Company (TTC) subway car. She is wearing a toque with exposed shoulder length braids underneath, along with a dark jacket and a leopard print scarf. Her name slowly appears on the screen. This scene lasts approximately five seconds then shifts to the inside of a nightclub. At this point, the first kick drum of the first bar coincides with the black and white screen turning to colour as close-up and mid-range shots of women in “dancehall queen” style costumes dance to the stuttering rhythm. At the eighteen-second mark, Michie Mee begins to rap:

‘Cause everything I do, you try to underrate me
Foot on your neck or your fuckin’ mix-tape, B!

This first couplet sets the tone for the rest of the video. Michie constructs a critical and defiant stance towards would-be critics or rivals. “Foot on your neck or your fuckin’ mix-tape, B!” is most likely a metaphor for eradicating her competition and their products and may well represent genuine ire towards her detractors.

The majority of the video takes place in a nightclub (Empire Restaurant and Lounge in Toronto’s Yorkville neighbourhood).²⁰² The lighting is dark in contrast to the bright white backdrop for the video of “Jamaican Funk – Canadian Style.” Of course, nightclubs are usually dark inside, but in the context of the music video, the lack of light provides an ominous vibe to

²⁰² Levy, “The Reverb, Volume 9: Behind the Scenes With Michie Mee.”

match Michie Mee's aggressive lyricism. The lack of light also allows for a black and white film, Cecil B. Demille's *The Crusades* (1935) to play on a screen behind Michie and her two male dancers, while they perform facing the camera. The purpose of the film's inclusion is unclear to me; perhaps it is simply for its black and white aesthetic. However, in one shot, King Richard removes his crown and hands it to a woman, who proceeds to put it on her head. The man then kneels before her. Michie Mee may have selected the film on the merit of this scene alone as it could symbolize her status as "an OG in the G-20 city," reclaiming her crown.

The video's dark colours are offset by bright hues of green, red, and gold (colours associated with Jamaica, reggae, and Rastafarianism) in the costumes worn by dancers and extras. For instance, one of Michie Mee's male background dancers wears a green cardigan sweater while the other male dancer dons red pants. There is another male dancer that appears in the video, but not directly behind Michie Mee. He is dressed in all black with accents that conform to the visual colour palette—gold jewelry, a green wristwatch wristband, as well as red sequins and a gold lock attached to his jacket. These details may seem small, but they contribute significantly to the video's colour palette.

Michie Mee wears dancehall-queen inspired attire, yet it is not explicitly sexual. She wears what appears to be a tank top dress with a ballerina-style fringe that hangs from the waist down to several centimetres above her knee. Fishnet-like stockings adorn her legs, and on her feet are Converse "Chuck Taylor" sneakers. The toque she wears on the subway is absent, revealing her braided hair, which is tied back exposing long earrings. She is also wearing jewelry in the form of rings, bracelets, and a necklace. The most striking element of her outfit is her makeup. Her face has silver eye shadow around the perimeter of her eye, and short vertical lines

are drawn underneath to accentuate her eyelashes. Circling her right eye are approximately seventeen bright shimmering circles.

Figure 7.1 (a-f) Still images from Michie Mee's "Bahdgyal Bubble."²⁰³ (dir. Ben Graeme & Coalhouse Campbell, 2012).

Michie Mee's attire and makeup are examples of the flamboyant and often sexualized fashion of dancehall queens. By wearing clothing and makeup associated with dancehall culture, Michie Mee signifies her Jamaican heritage and identity. In other parts of the video, she is seen donning the toque and jacket on the subway, a subway platform, and briefly outside a convenience store. If these clothes were worn in the nightclub scenes, the goal of presenting Michie Mee's Jamaican identity (aside from just a musical direction) would not be as easily understood by the viewer. In other words, the reggae beats, patois, fashion, and colour palette of black, red, gold, and green, when combined and repeated, create a "visual leitmotiv" that "enable[s] the spectator to recognize the development of specific images as matching specific

²⁰³ Michie Mee, "Bahdgyal Bubble," directed Ben Graeme & Coalhouse Campbell, posted December 26, 2012, accessed May 14, 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LII0xCv7vtM>.

musical developments,” as described by Gabrielli.²⁰⁴ What the toque and jacket do offer are symbols of the Canadian winter, thereby articulating Michie Mee’s Canadian identity alongside her Jamaican identity. The close-up of a hooded jacket with “CANADA” emblazoned on the back provides further signification of the Canadian winter.

Figure 7.2 (a-c) Still images from Michie Mee’s “Bahdgyal Bubble.”²⁰⁵

A critical element of the video is the group of female dancers visible in numerous scenes who are also dressed in “dancehall queen” attire, but more provocatively so. The dancers all wear low-cut “pum pum” shorts, some with bare legs, others wearing black patterned stockings. Other dancehall-style fashions include brightly dyed hair (blonde or red in keeping with the visual colour palette), gold jewelry, nose studs, belly button piercings, and bikini tops. The dancers also engage in sexually suggestive dancing that requires squatting and leaning to accentuate their buttocks, common maneuvers in the genre. Although the female dancers perform in a more sexual manner than their male counterparts, I would argue that this is not an example of exploitation of the dancers, a common criticism of hip-hop videos. Just as women play a central role in the live environment of dancehall reggae events, Michie Mee’s female dancers

²⁰⁴ Gabrielli, “An Analysis of the Relationship Between Music and Image,” 96.

²⁰⁵ Michie Mee, “Bahdgyal Bubble,” (music video).

play a critical role in reinforcing the dancehall theme, which brings her Jamaican identity to the foreground. Moreover, the addition of the female dancers dressed in “dancehall queen” regalia and performing dancehall style choreography contribute to the video’s “visual leitmotiv.” With repetition, the visual leitmotiv increases the ability of the viewer to comprehend the identity and nation-based connections created between the music, lyrics, colour palette, and imagery.

Figure 7.3 (a-f) Still images from Michie Mee’s “Bahdgyal Bubble.”²⁰⁶

A subtle yet crucial editing technique that encapsulates Michie Mee’s Jamaican/Canadian hybrid identity is the use of black and white footage intermittently throughout the video. At times during her performance, outdoor scenes of Michie and local reggae artist Lindo P are also visible.²⁰⁷ In one of these scenes, the two are walking towards the camera in winter clothing, chatting and laughing. Lindo P’s jacket, the same “CANADA” jacket that appears near the end

²⁰⁶ Michie Mee, “Bahdgyal Bubble,” (music video).

²⁰⁷ King Turbo, a long-time Toronto reggae DJ and sound system owner, also makes an appearance in the video.

of the video, features a maple leaf badge with the letters “CAN” visible on his left arm. The overlapping of these images strategically embeds the Canadian signifier (the winter jacket and maple leaf patch) into the dancehall reggae imagery (via Michie Mee’s makeup and visual colour palette).

Figure 7.4 Still image from Michie Mee’s “Bahdgyal Bubble.”²⁰⁸

Additional Dancehall Reggae Signifiers

The video’s musical, lyrical, and fashion elements, as well as its symbolic colour palette, work together to connote dancehall reggae culture. There are other signifiers of a dancehall aesthetic as well. For example, Michie Mee exemplifies the “badness-honour” attitude of rude-bwoi culture in her lyrics, facial gestures, and bodily poses throughout her performance.²⁰⁹

Samples of lyrics that connote this image include:

²⁰⁸ Michie Mee, “Bahdgyal Bubble,” (music video).

²⁰⁹ It should be noted that “bahdgyal,” aside from a female equivalent to “bad man” or “rude bwoi,” also means “a female that makes a name for [herself] without conforming to what society sees as ‘right’ for women” (www.jamaicanpatwah.com) - thereby supporting the notion that Michie Mee wants to defy popular trends and industry standards.

“I keep it gully”

“Gully” means “street” or “rough.” Its use effectively promotes an image that is not “pop” or conventional.

“Yuh neva no dem haffi respect Michee”

She commands respect, both on record and in the streets.

“Which rich bitch wanna fuck wit’ a dread?”

Similar to the previous line but uses the Jamaican term “dread” to describe one who wears dreadlocks, but also possesses a “bad” reputation.

“I’ma boost this bitch
And if she dis, I’ma let the whole fam hit”

“Boost” translates to rob or steal. “Dis” is shorthand for disrespect. While the word “bitch” is not gender specific in this context, it is commonly directed at women as a derogatory term.

Moreover, Michie Mee follows the line with the pronoun “she;” therefore, it is safe to suggest these lines are directed at female detractors or opponents. Michie then states that if she is disrespected, her “fam[ily]” or “posse” in Jamaican parlance, will have revenge. Such aggressive lyrics are hyperbole, but they reinforce the “bahdgyal” image that Michie Mee is attempting to portray in the video’s dancehall narrative.

The “bad man/gyal” image is reinforced by Michie Mee’s facial and bodily gestures throughout the video. For the majority of the video, she faces the camera matching the viewer’s gaze in a somewhat confrontational manner. Many of her gestures are similarly confrontational: pointing at the camera’s lens, clenching her fist and throwing it at the camera, putting her hands on her hips while cocking her head to the side, and defiantly crossing her arms. It is important to note that these aggressive mannerisms are juxtaposed with more “feminine” or relaxed gestures,

which seem to highlight their aggressiveness even further. For instance, near the song's end, the riddim changes subtly by adding a handclap on the upbeat after the first and third beats of a measure. The tempo remains the same, but this addition creates the illusion that the beat has sped up. Michie Mee's choreography responds to this change with the addition of smiling, waving her hands above her head, and making kicking motions with her feet. The kicking motion corresponds to a vocal sample of herself singing "kick up yo foot." This coordination of vocals and onscreen visuals is an example of Gabrielli's fifth function of the image in music video editing, namely to "create matches with given parts of the song."

Figure 7.5 (a-c) Still images from Michie Mee's "Bahdgyal Bubble."²¹⁰

As discussed in chapter two, dancehall artists traditionally perform over instrumental tracks called "riddims." Rejuvenating past riddims, some that date back to the 1960s is a widespread practice, although many contemporary riddims are built from scratch. All riddims are given individual titles, and an unofficial canon of dancehall riddims exists. When a riddim becomes popular, due to it being the background of a hit song, vocalists then record their renditions of the beat to ride the riddim's popularity. To illustrate, Prince Jammy and Wayne Smith's "Under Mi Sleng Teng," the most acclaimed dancehall record of 1985, initiated numerous recordings in its wake by vocalists who recorded their own versions. This particular instrumental is known as dancehall reggae's "first computerized beat and a turning point in the production of Jamaican

²¹⁰ Michie Mee, "Bahdgyal Bubble," (music video).

popular music.”²¹¹ Records such as Tenor Saw’s “Pumpkin Belly,” Super Cat’s “Trash and Ready,” and Nicodemus’s “Eagles Feather” all hit the market shortly after the success of Wayne Smith’s rendition. According to Riddim Database, an online database tracking the frequency a riddim is used in a song, the “Sleng Teng” riddim has been used 380 times, the second highest in reggae history. The database lists the Coxsone Dodd-produced “Real Rock” riddim as number one. “Real Rock” dates back to 1967, thus highlighting the “Sleng Teng” riddim’s popularity with only forty less renditions of the track in eighteen fewer years. In other words, it is possible for numerous, even hundreds, of songs to feature the same riddim or variations of it.

Today’s riddims commonly divert from the four-bar ostinato pattern of traditional riddims. “Bahdgyal Bubble” is no exception as the drum pattern changes often, contains many drum fills, and the melody blends in and out of the track. The music itself, without vocals, is a riddim named “Mad Rass” produced by Smoke Shop Productionz of Brampton, Ontario. While the video for “Bahdgyal Bubble” can be viewed on YouTube, the audio version is available on a compilation simply entitled “Mad Rass Riddim.” The compilation, available for download, contains eleven different versions of the track with eleven different vocalists. “Bahdgyal Bubble” is just one of several adaptations of the “Mad Rass” riddim. By recording her own version, Michie Mee is following the reggae tradition of recording one’s vocals over a recycled riddim. This subtle, yet important, detail affirms Michie’s projection of a Jamaican identity as the practice is firmly rooted within the rituals of dancehall culture.

²¹¹ Mel Cooke, “30 Years Of Sleng Teng - King Jammy Recalls Impact Of Digital Breakthrough,” *The Jamaica Gleaner*, posted April 12, 2015, accessed May 29, 2015. <http://jamaica-gleaner.com/article/entertainment/20150412/30-years-sleng-teng-king-jammy-recalls-impact-digital-breakthrough>.

As discussed by Julian Henriques, dancehall reggae artists draw upon a series of vocal performative techniques. While these strategies are practiced and honed in live environments, the techniques often find their way onto studio recordings. One such technique, as outlined by Henriques, is “prosody”—the distinctive qualities of a performer’s voice. Each vocalist possesses a unique timbre, intonation, texture that combine to delineate the voice’s “auditory character.”²¹² Prosody is made possible by the vocalist’s natural tone of voice, vocal inflections, and volume control on the microphone. It is important for vocalists of any genre to distinguish themselves from others. However, in dancehall reggae, Henriques attributes the importance of a unique oral performance due to extra noise that factors into a live performance. Henriques explains:

Often the MC’s hoarse, rapid-fire shouts, exclamations and comments are further distorted by the electronics of the set and the shouting of the crowd, making it very difficult to make out many of the words being spoken, or even sense of what is being said. But this is what allows the MC to perform their own fleshly embodiment, producing themselves as speakers – as we all do.²¹³

Michie Mee, like other dancehall practitioners, has developed live vocal techniques to assist in her performances. These techniques then make their way onto studio recordings, and “Bahdgyal Bubble” is one example.

Her natural vocal timbre and tone is neither hoarse nor notably high or low, but she raises and lowers the volume of her voice for dramatic effect throughout “Bahdgyal Bubble.” For example, when she performs the song’s first two lines, the last syllable of each line is accented by raising the volume of her voice as well as her pitch. The result is an increase in tension,

²¹² Henriques, *Sonic Bodies*, 200.

²¹³ Ibid.

complementing the song and video's aggressive nature. It also serves to set the tone for the remainder of the performance:

‘Cause everything I do, you try to underrate *me*
Foot on your neck or your fuckin' mix-tape, *B!*

At times throughout the song, Michie Mee lowers her voice as if to heighten the seriousness of her lyrics. She also uses a “sing-song” delivery that works to offset the lower register vocal, enhancing the overall performance by showcasing varying vocal styles. For example:

Big pussy sellout, me and dem fell out (in a lower register)
Dey attitude like a [side] kick Michelle out (in a lower register)
Yuh neva no dem haffi respect Michee (“sing-song”)
Yuh has go get non a mi dee jay money (“sing-song”)

Finally, in the line, “Haters gon hate and still wanna ride with me,” she puts special emphasis on the word “haters,” which is street slang for detractors. She affects her voice in a manner that resembles whining, although briefly, thus demeaning those who “hate” on her. Prosody is just one voicing technique employed by Michie Mee in “Bahdgyal Bubble” that effectively draws the viewer to her vocals while complementing the riddim and the visual leitmotiv.

The vocal technique that Henriques identifies as “riding the riddim” involves singing the vocal line in a way that is “in sync” with the riddim and with the “vibes” of the audience. There is no live audience in the video; however, there are numerous examples of Michie Mee deftly “riding the riddim.” As outlined by Manuel and Marshall, a common dancehall riddim emphasizes a kick drum on the first and fourth eighth notes of a 4/4 measure with a snare drum shot on the sixth beat. With some exceptions, as when extra kick-drum beats or percussion are added, this rhythm makes up the majority of the backing track in “Bahdgyal Bubble.” In both the rapped passages and the patois, Michie Mee strategically syncs vocal syllables with the kick-

drum pattern as to emphasize particular words. In “Bahdgyal Bubble” however, a third kick drum is placed where the snare would usually land, thereby acting as a push to the next measure and providing an extra kick drum for Michie to emphasize a word. In the example below, lyrics in bold indicate words that are directly in time with a kick drum, thereby emphasizing particular syllables as Michie stays in time with the rhythm. In this first example, the first three lines follow a pause on the first beat. Michie then comes in on the eighth note following the first beat. However, in the fourth line, she switches the pattern, and the first word lands on the first beat of the bar.

- 1 **[beat]** ‘Cause everything I **do** yuh **try** to underrate me
- 2 **[beat]** Foot on yuh **neck or** yuh **fuck-in’** mix tape, B
- 3 **[beat]** A keep it **gull-y wen** di **bitches** out a shape, yuh
- 4 **Pug waan rake**, meet mi a **di gate**

In lines five through eight, she switches her cadence, so the first word and first beat are in time with each other.

- 5 *Right On!* **I’m** *Rappa-* ges, ah rote [em selves], I’m
- 6 All hip-hop, **rap**, **radar**, **Mich-elle**
- 7 **Stay** tuned sucker, di **rap** game fucker, be-
- 8 **Fore** a go sum a **get** lyrically, butt up

Michie then switches her delivery back to how she begun the song, allowing the first beat of each bar to remain without words.

- 9 **[beat]** So which rap **ghett-o ere** she mi afraid ah
- 10 **[beat]** Tell the boss **jus to put up di** paper
- 11 **One** milli, two **mill**, **three** mill, she dead, ah
- 12 **Which** rich bitch **waan fuck** wid **di dred?**
- 13 **Big** pussy sell out **mi** an dem fell out
- 14 **[beat]** Di attitude **like a [side]** kick Michelle out
- 15 **[beat]** Yuh neva no dem **haf-fi respect Mich-ee**
- 16 **[beat]** Yuh nah go get **non** a mi **dee jay mon-ey**
- 17 **[beat]** ‘Memba **wen** mi **use fi spin** round pon it an if yuh
- 18 **Man** waan mi him **haf-fi pay** dung **pon it**

Translation:

Because everything I do, you try to underrate me
 Foot for your neck or your fuckin' mixtape, B
 I keep it gully when the bitches are out of shape [your head need raking]
 Meet me at the gate.
I'm Right On!, I'm Rappages
 I'm all hip-hop, rap, radar, Michelle
 Stay tuned sucker, the rap game fucker, before I go some get lyrical, shut up
 So, so which girl you've heard that I'm afraid of
 Tell the boss to put forward the money
 One million, two millions, three millions, she's dead
 Which rich bitch want to fuck with the dread
 Big pussy sell out, me and them fell out.
 The attitude, like a [side] kick Michelle out
 You didn't know they have to respect Michee
 You won't be getting any of my DJ money
 Remember when I used to spin round on it and
 If your man want me, he has to pay down on it

Michie Mee makes careful choices for specific syllables to fall on specific beats. In doing so, her words are punctuated by the underlying rhythm, predominantly by the kick drum of the dancehall reggae beat. Together, Michie Mee's use of "prosody" and "riding the riddim" provide further signifiers of dancehall reggae culture. Although these skills are designed to aid the performer during a live performance, the same skills find their way into the recording studio. They are certainly on clear display in "Bahdgyal Bubble."

"Bahdgyal Bubble" showcases Michie Mee representing her Jamaican identity to a degree not seen or heard since *Jamaican Funk – Canadian Style*. The combination of lyrics, music, and vocal styles, in addition to the imagery and repetition of "visual leitmotifs" in the video, all combine to create a nuanced representation of her Jamaican identity. By combining Jamaican themes with Canadian cultural signifiers such as the "CANADA" jacket, references to Toronto and the TTC, the result is a complex expression of her hybridized identity.

CONCLUSION

Michie Mee has been an active performer for three decades. Throughout her career, she has articulated, to varying degrees, a hybridized Jamaican-Canadian identity through her music, vocals, and visuals. Her pioneering rap/reggae fusion helped usher in a generation of similar recordings, a feat that has gone largely unrecognized until the present study.

In the opening chapter, I explained how diaspora studies, and the concepts of third space and code-switching, would provide a theoretical framework with which to interrogate performative strategies. On the concept of diaspora, Cohen proclaimed that displaced communities often produce cultural products that express a celebration or loyalty to their former homeland. Third space, according to Bhabha, is a conceptual environment located where a host culture and an immigrant culture combine to create new hybrid identities and cultural forms. Michie Mee's vocal performances provide a series of particularly compelling examples of code-switching, the practice of comfortably moving between different types of linguistic (and, by extension, musical) codes. The concepts of diaspora, hybridity, third space, and code-switching provided a rich framework for analyzing some of the ways in which Michie Mee has constructed and performed a hybridized identity throughout her long and illustrious career.

Michie Mee has incorporated a wide variety of dancehall signifiers into her performance practice including not only musical elements, but also Jamaican patois, dancehall fashion, and an oppositional attitude and politics. In addition to signifying her Jamaican musical and cultural heritage, she regularly signifies her Canadian identity through frequent references to Canada, Toronto, and various neighbourhoods within the city. Her initial recordings—made in 1987/1988 when merging reggae with rap and code-switching between patois and North American English was exceedingly rare—provided a blueprint for subsequent hybridized musical expressions, both

in general and within her own oeuvre. For example, her 1991 debut LP, the aptly titled *Jamaican Funk – Canadian Style* represented her dual nationalities and helped blaze a trail for the rise in popularity of rap/reggae fusion and for dancehall to break into the mainstream as evidenced by the subsequent success of artists such as Shabba Ranks, Shaggy and Sean Paul. Her joining of Raggadeath further exemplified her extraordinary level of creative mobility as she moved into heavy metal, while still retaining a hybridized Jamaican-Canadian — and hip-hop— identity. The dancehall influence was noticeably toned down on her album *The First Cut is the Deepest* from the year 2000. The music, lyrics, and videos projected fewer Jamaican cultural signifiers than in her earlier work.

A series of relatively recent independent releases show Michie Mee once again articulating her Jamaican-Canadian heritage. Greater than ever before, the video for “Bahdgyal Bubble” exhibits a concentrated mélange of dancehall reggae rhythms, dancing, “dancehall queen” fashion, patois, and a Jamaican-influenced visual leitmotiv in the video’s colour scheme. In addition, Michie Mee’s hand gestures and facial expressions in the video recall the rude-boy aesthetic that has permeated reggae from its earliest days, articulating an oppositional stance towards the constraints that the music industry has tried to place on her. Throughout her career, dancehall reggae has afforded her the ability to express her heritage and thumb her nose at critics and industry executives who have attempted to remove the “Jamaican-ness” from her art.

A variety of factors have contributed to Michie Mee’s exploration of her roots in Jamaica and Canada. These factors include: childhood experiences (the impact of witnessing pioneers Louise “Miss Lou” Bennett and Lillian Allen early in Michie’s childhood); early mentors (the support of Ron Nelson, Ivan Berry and Boogie Down Productions); frustration with the music industry; and the thoroughly multicultural environment of Toronto, a city with a large Jamaican

population. Her music makes it clear that she is a proud Canadian and Jamaican. She has also made it clear who she is not. Indeed, she has gone to great lengths to highlight the uniqueness of her subject position, particularly in relation to dominant hip-hop trends emerging from the United States. She is “no American clone.” Throughout her career, she has embraced the fluidity of hybridized identity. Whether Michie Mee rapped, chatted in patois, or sang in a heavy metal band, she seldom removed Jamaican signifiers from her performance practice and persona and when she did, it was not without a fight.

Michie Mee is a Canadian hip-hop pioneer. Many subsequent artists have, like Michie Mee, articulated a hybrid identity in their music and image. As Rinaldo Walcott notes, it is not unusual for Canadian hip-hop artists to move fluidly between African-American based music genres and Caribbean-based genres. From the time when rap music was virtually unknown in Canada until the present day, Michie Mee has articulated her hybridized Jamaican-Canadian identity through her performance practice. In doing so, she not only helped pave the way for future rap/reggae recordings, she set a standard for how Canadian hip-hop artists could express themselves through cultural signifiers that recall their homeland as well as Canada. Kardinal Offishall, born in Canada to Jamaican parents, is a rapper who exhibits a strong Jamaican-Canadian identity. Numerous recordings feature the rapper articulating Jamaican and Canadian signifiers in addition to lyrical references to Toronto, just as Michie Mee did before him. Somalia-born K’naan is another artist who expresses a dual identity through his music and videos. Even Canada’s top-selling rapper, multi-platinum selling Drake has celebrated his Jewish heritage. These examples are just a fraction of the numerous Canadian hip-hop acts that identify with more than one cultural identity.

Moving forward, it is essential that hip-hop scholars examine other examples of cultural or national hybridity within the music and image of other hip-hop artists. Moreover, we must ask why hip-hop has become such an important vehicle for expressing such subject positions, while acknowledging the fact that identities are always in flux. What makes hip-hop culture an attractive vehicle for so wide a cross-section of ethnicities to engage in the expression of hybrid identities that reflect the diversity of Canada's population? Perhaps hybridity is best demonstrated via hip-hop's remix culture. Alternatively, is it possible that Canada's cultural mosaic provides a third space—or a series of third spaces—that allow for the realization and articulation of new subject positions within hip-hop.

With this thesis, I have taken some initial steps towards outlining a model for the analysis of Canadian hip-hop artists who, like Michie Mee, come from a hybrid cultural background. By investigating additional Canadian hip-hop practitioners, future studies will advance our understanding of what makes Canada such fertile soil for the construction, performance, maintenance, and contestation of hybrid cultural and national identities.

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