Bob Marley's Music as an Alternative Communicative Channel in Postcolonial Movements for Development and Social Change

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The mediatization of the world is an important concept to understand in connection to development and social change. As Martin Scott states, "Media not only increase[s] our access to knowledge of events happening around the world, but also (seemingly) enable[s] us to influence them" (Scott, 2014, p. 1). There seems to be a tendency "to focus on the very latest technological supports" (Mattoni & Treré, 2014, p. 255) when considering the social movements of the present. This "technological-fascination bias" often neglects "the relevance that prior technological supports had and continue to have in social movements" (Mattoni & Treré, 2014, p. 255). There is no doubt that today's technology affects "mediation processes"—the flow, circulation, and interpretation of media (Mattoni & Treré, 2014, p. 260), which in turn affects social movements. However, in the age of the Internet with its latest applications, it can be easy to neglect the roles of alternative media, such as music, in social movements. "Music [has] played an integral role in social movements and liberation movements" (Prestholdt, 2019, p. 77). This essay focuses on Bob Marley's Music as an alternative communicative channel in postcolonial movements for development and social change. In the context of this essay, *postcolonialism* refers to both: condition—the state of being after colonialism and imperialism; and to anti-colonialism—against all forms of colonial power (McEwan 2018, pp. 29, 33). While *development*—which has many definitions—speaks to an expansion of freedoms, particularly the freedom of expression (Scott, 2014, p. 9); and *social change* means altering "the existing world [or social] order" (Hagerman, 2012, p. 389).

The Significance of Referencing Bob Marley

I chose to focus on the music of Bob Marley for several reasons, including he was one of "the first truly global pop stars" (Prestholdt, 2019, p. 70); he used music as an "awareness-raising process that led to processes of collective action" (Tufte, 2017, p. 18), which he saw as an act of resistance; and he exemplifies what Cheryl McEwan defines as a "subaltern." A subaltern is not simply someone who is generally marginalized or oppressed. A subaltern is "a person or groups of people rendered voiceless and without agency by their social status….people whose voices cannot be heard or that are wilfully ignored in dominant modes of narrative production" (McEwan, 2018, pp. 22-23). Bob Marley refers to these voiceless people as "sufferers" in his song "Babylon System" (Marley & Wailers, 1979).

In 1962, Jamaica—which had been a colony of the United Kingdom, and a colony of Spain before that— became independent. During the 1960s Reggae music emerged as

an art form that "spoke of and to the experience of the postcolonial Jamaican underclass," especially Rastafarians, who were "perceived as dangerous" by Jamaica's upper class, "and often treated as criminals" (Prestholdt, 2019, p. 80). Reggae presented "the counter-history to the accepted colonial story;" (Hagerman, 2012, p. 385) and was aimed at eliminating the 'lingering and debilitating modes of thought and action that comprise[d] postcolonial conditions,' (McEwan, 2018 quoting Myers, 2006, p. 33) in Jamaica.

Messages in Bob Marley's Music

Bob Marley's music was heavily influenced by, and intertwined with, his Rastafarian beliefs, there is no separating the music from the beliefs that shaped the man. The "Babylon System" Marley referred to in his music—for example, the 1979 song with the same name—is part of a wider Rastafarian Biblical allegory in which the Global North is as destructive to people of African descent as the kingdom of Babylon was to the Israelites. Marley's music critiques the "destructive social forces" of the modern world including: "greed, envy, desires for power and control," (Prestholdt, 2019, p. 79) "racism, classism, dehumanization," neo-colonialism through "teaching a white version of history," (Hagerman, 2012, p. 383) and any oppressive system that upholds the 'institutional models of the elite of the western world,' (Hagerman, 2012 quoting Johnson-Hill, 1995, p. 383). Marley used his music to communicate to the powerless so they could "understand why they are disempowered," by making them aware of "the sociocultural conditions that shape one's life" and "the possibility of their transformation" (Svensson, 2018, p. 11).

Marley's 1976 song "War" is a great example of his use of music for conscientization, and is one proof I offer of his music being an alternative communicative channel. Except for the variations of the refrain "Me say war," the lyrics of the song are taken directly from the 1968 speech to the United Nations by Ethiopian emperor Haile Selassie I. For many, the song seems to be a call to universal peace, with any mention of violence simply being metaphor, because anything less will only result in war. However, as with the concept of the "Babylon System," Marley's definition of peace must be understood in a Rastafarian context. For Rastafarians, "peace is not the equivalent of nonviolence;" in fact, violence may be necessary as an act of self-defence in the struggle for liberation (Hagerman, 2012, p. 387). For Rastafarians, peace is more closely linked to equal rights, justice (Hagerman, 2012, p. 387) and empowerment—whereby those without power "restore their sense of self and value," challenge existing power relations, take control of their environment, and achieve their own goals (Svensson, 2018, p. 9). Thus, "War" is as much about decolonization as it is about achieving lasting peace. It is a clarion call to "reconstruct the social reality of the status quo" through ending the Global

North's institutional violence and the neo-colonialism that results (Hagerman, 2012, p. 388). Even if a listener cannot decipher the multi-layered meaning in the lyrics they recite as they sing along, it still remains that, for the first time, many people had access to a speech they may never have heard otherwise. As John Rockwell stated in a 1978 edition of The New York Times, "Who would have believed that Madison Square Garden would have swayed en masse to a speech by Haile Selassie…?" (Prestholdt, 2019, p. 74).

Connection to Postcolonial Movements for Development and Social Change

What made Bob Marley's music such a powerful alternative communicative channel is the fact that people on every continent were able to access it. Today, we understand that access to information communication technologies (ICTs) is unequal (Svensson, 2018, p. 12). But thanks to various ICTs in the 1970s, 80s, and 90s—"radio, 78s, LPs, and perhaps most importantly, cassette tapes"—Bob Marley's music and ideas were able to disseminate (Prestholdt, 2019, p. 72). These ICTs allowed Marley as a new voice, representative of the Global South, to emerge and be heard (Tufte, 2017, p. 44). Although Marley's music was censored and even banned in certain areas because of its anti-establishment and revolutionary content, pirated and uncensored recordings were smuggled in (Prestholdt, 2019, p. 90). As a result, Marley's music became very influential in postcolonial movements for development and social change from Australia to Zimbabwe. His songs became "transnational anthems for social justice, equality, and political reform" (Prestholdt, 2019, p. 71).

In the 1970s, Marley's music was a common reference for Aboriginal peoples embracing the Black Power Movement in Australia. Marley's track "Zimbabwe" from his 1979 album "Uprising," spoke to his solidarity with Zimbabweans and was firm in its declaration of the right to self-determination. In the final months of the Zimbabwe War of Liberation, Marley's song gave Zimbabwean Freedom Fighters fighting to end white minority rule in Rhodesia "a moral lift while simultaneously raising their global profile," (Prestholdt, 2019, p. 89). Marley would later perform the song Zimbabwe at the nation's 1980 independence ceremony.

Also in the late 1970s, the Sandinista National Liberation Front (Frente Sandinista de Liberación Nacional), Nicaraguan insurgents, listened to songs by Bob Marley before going into combat. In 1979, the New Joint Endeavour Welfare, Education and Liberation (JEWEL) Movement played banned Bob Marley songs to announce the arrival of revolution to the people of Grenada; "When Grenadians heard songs of liberation on the radio they recognized that the announcement was genuine and that a revolution was indeed underway," (Prestholdt, 2019, p. 69).

Marley's message did not just resonate with subalterns or those from the Global South. Marley's 1980 "Uprising" Tour stop in Zurich, Switzerland is linked with the Opera House riots (Opernhauskrawalle) and the ensuing "Zurich Burns" youth rebellion. "While his performance was not the [direct] cause of the Zurich Burns uprising, its uncanny timing and his emotive message helped to propel simmering youth discontent into outright rebellion," (Prestholdt, 2019, p. 92). Marley died in 1981 but his music continued to have effect. In 1994, April demonstrations "ahead of the first democratic South African elections saw activists in Soweto rallying under images of Bob Marley," (Prestholdt, 2019, p. 95). In Sierra Leone, young men "were detained and sometimes killed for wearing Bob Marley shirts" because the Revolutionary United Front (RUF)—the group that initiated a civil war—used Bob Marley T-shirts as an impromptu uniform (Prestholdt, 2019, p. 95).

Although it can be argued that "those without power are fundamentally different from each other because of their specific positions in the intersecting axes of oppression" (Svensson, 2018, p. 6), I believe one reason Marley's music served as a bridge for people in the global community is because of many of the aspects of globalization Eriksen articulates in his book. For example, the *standardization* of ICTs across continents; *mobility*—Marley was able to travel from his native country of Jamaica to Africa, North America, and Europe; *mixing*—Marley appropriated American phrases like "make love, not war" and used it in reggae music (Prestholdt, 2019, p. 74); *identity politics*—Marley's musical rhetoric strengthened the collective identities of people in the Global South, particularly people in the African diaspora, and yet it had important similarities to the grammar used to promote the rights of others; and *alterglobalization*—Marley's religious "moral commitment, concerns with local power, and community integration," into systemic resistance is a quintessential example of an alternative to, what Marley believed to be neo-colonialism by way of, the "neoliberal capitalism operating at a global level" (Eriksen, 2014, p. 12).

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Up to this point, this essay has attempted to link globalization with the mediatization of the world by offering Bob Marley's music and its connection to postcolonial movements for development and social change as a case study. In this conclusion, I will attempt to cover three points. First, I will reflect more on the mediation process, specifically, as it relates to interpretation and the construction of reality. Secondly, I will give an example of an interpretation of Bob Marley's music as possible evidence of co-option based on an interview response to researcher Simon Jones. Thirdly, I will discuss the impact and implications of mediated interpretation and any resulting appropriation of the subaltern voice.

Interpretation and Construction of Reality as Part of the Mediation Process

As previously stated, "mediation processes" refer to the flow, circulation, and interpretation of media. Unlike *mediatization*—which is concerned with transformations of social and cultural institutions resulting from the media's growing influence—*mediation* is a social process "in which media supports the flow of discourses, meanings, and interpretations in societies" (Mattoni & Treré, 2014, p. 260). Bob Marley's music is an example of mediated communication. While I briefly touched on *flow*—the voice of a subaltern from the Global South going global, and therefore moving in all directions; and *circulation*—the use of 78s, LPs, and cassette tapes; I did not comment on *interpretation* directly.

Nick Couldry and Andreas Hepp, state that the social dimension of reality is built on communications and interpretations (Couldry & Hepp, 2016, p. 5). This social world is a type of material reality that is "a product of human interaction itself, with all its power-relations and inequalities," so while there is only one physical world, there are "many possible, and even conflicting, constructions of it" (Couldry & Hepp, 2016, pp. 21-22). Recognizing the role of interpretation and the consequential constructions of reality that stem from the different possible interpretations is enlightening when one considers that Bob Marley's music is linked with so many different movements for development and social change around the world, Although I am focused on *mediation*, and not *mediatization*, I still take a social-constructivist or cultural approach. Meaning, I understand that the interpretation of mediated communications—and any corresponding constructions of reality—is based on an interrelation between *sociocultural factors*—for example, economic, technological, cultural, etc.; and *media communication* (Hepp, Hjarvard, & Lundby, 2015, p. 317). Thus, Bob Marley's global audience interpreted his music—the *media communication*—through the lens of their particular life

situation—composed of *sociocultural factors*; and the reality constructed around their understanding of their situation. For this reason, Marley's song "War" can be interpreted as a call to universal peace on one hand; and a demand to end the North's institutional violence and the resulting neo-colonization, on the other.

Message Appropriation and The Example of an Interview Response

I previously pointed out that Bob Marley's music served as an alternative communicative channel with influence on movements in the Global South—for example, the Zimbabwe War of Liberation; as well as in the Global North— for example, Opernhauskrawalle and the ensuing "Zurich Burns" youth rebellion. Marley's subaltern status sits in tension with the popularity of his music. It can certainly be argued that this tension results in his dissenting message and revolutionary social critique getting lost because of appropriation by audiences in the Global North. The popularity of Bob Marley's music among white listeners, particularly white youth, offers evidence of such possible appropriation. One question that arises is can, and should, mediatized collectivities (Couldry & Hepp, 2016, p. 170) in the Global North be held responsible for co-opting a message that originates from a subaltern in the Global South, given that media can change the feel, texture and meaning of a message (Couldry & Hepp, 2016, p. 173) depending on the context of a constructed reality?

In the 1980s researcher Simon Jones interviewed Bob Marley fans in the UK; and found that many young, white listeners interpreted Bob Marley's music through the lens of class. One of Jones' white male interviewees articulated his interpretation of Bob Marley's music in this way: "I could relate very strongly to 'sufferation' and 'sufferers' music even though I wasn't black … you know, 'stop pushing me Mr. Boss Man' … And the ones about freedom too. 'Cos I hated school, I felt I was captive by school, and by people in authority" (Prestholdt, 2019, p. 70). Here this interviewee likens "sufferation" and "sufferers" to the experience of being a part of the white working class; and uses the word "captive" to describe his feelings toward school and being subject to people in authority. As previously stated, Marley's use of the word "sufferer" goes beyond merely being oppressed. He was referencing people, specifically black people in the postcolonial Global South who were wilfully ignored and rendered voiceless in dominant modes of narrative production perpetuated by institutions in the Global North. Being required to attend classes at school is in no way similar to being colonized or enslaved and being forced to learn a version of history that excludes you. Thus, this interviewee's liberal interpretation of Bob Marley's music could be seen as co-opting Marley's original message and serve as another example of the subaltern voice once again being ignored, as Bob Marley's music falls on ears deafened by the plight of classism and individualism in the Global North. But is it wrong for the collectivity of the white,

working-class counterculture in the UK to interpret Bob Marley's music this way? Isn't this interpretation the result of globalization, particularly mixing? Suffice to say, the intersection of globalization, postcolonialism, and mediation processes—specifically, the process of interpretation—raises many questions.

Impact and Implications

I have made the case that Bob Marley's music served as an alternative communicative channel with far-reaching impact on postcolonial movements for development and social change. I have articulated that this impact is directly connected to the mediation process of interpretation and the resulting construction of reality. I have argued that Bob Marley's audience in the Global North and the Global South interpret his music through the lens of the different sociocultural factors affecting them. I have discussed the potential for silencing the subaltern voice when audiences in the Global North appropriate Marley's music and apply it to their life circumstances.

I raised the question whether audiences in the Global North can, and should, be held responsible for co-opting subaltern messages. There are yet more general questions around mediated communication and impact. For example, to what extent does mediated communication today expand or constrain impact? For instance, music is more mediated and globalized today than ever before; and yet in some ways is less accessible because it is inseparably intertwined with digital media technology. The dominant mode of music circulation is no longer LPs, 78s, cassette tapes, CDs, or even MP3s. Music is now streamed through platforms that in theory can be accessed with a stable wireless connection from anywhere around the world. However, wireless connections are subject to the digital divide, which Svensson argues includes several access gaps, including: access to technology, access to specific content, and access (or lack thereof) based on gender (Svensson, 2018, p. 12). If Bob Marley were to have been an emerging musician today, rising in global popularity, one must wonder if his mediated message would even reach the people he was speaking on behalf of and advocating for.

How does globalization affect the appropriation of the subaltern voice, and the recognition of such appropriation? If in an effort to embrace the subaltern message, the message is co-opted, what does that mean for the construction of a more equitable reality for all? At present, I have no definitive answers. Does interpretation in the Global North of subaltern messages from the Global South always lead to appropriation to suit particular life situations in the Global North? No. Many academics are proof of this. Progress is made every time academics from the Global North get better at recognizing their complicity in ignoring the voice of the subaltern; and make more of an effort to

create space, listen, acknowledge and appreciate messages from the Global South. However, as McEwan states, even when this is the case, caution must be continuously exercised so that "it is not the privileged, critical first world scholars who are transformed and empowered," while the subaltern continues to be denied and affected by institutional violence (McEwan 2018, p. 372). This same sentiment can be applied to understanding Bob Marley's music as an alternative communicative channel. If progress in the areas of postcolonial development and social change is to be made, it should not be the privileged audience in the Global North that listens to Marley's music and interprets his message in such a way that they feel transformed and empowered, while the audience in the Global South continue to have their voices silenced and be negatively affected by the power-relations and inequalities the Global North audience is complicit in.

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