

Transcript

Episode 16: The crime of black repair in Jamaica.

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[Scammer's Yard](#) is an ethnography that focuses on the stories of three young Black Jamaicans who strive to make a living in Montego Bay, where call centers and tourism are the two main industries in the struggling economy. Author Jovan Scott Lewis raises unsettling questions about the fairness of a world economy that relegates Caribbean populations to durative sufferation. This groundbreaking book asks whether true reparation for the legacy of colonialism is to be found only through radical—even criminal—means. Lewis, an assistant professor of geography and African American Studies at UC Berkeley, is joined here by [Peter James Hudson](#), associate professor of African American Studies and History at UCLA. This conversation was recorded in November 2020.

Sound bite: “How is it possible that an elderly person in Bismarck, North Dakota, is somehow responsible for your reparation? And one of the crew members replied, with a very pithy, but poignant and powerful response, which was but they're the same white people. And I was like, Oh, okay. All right. How are they the same white people? That was a question that I put to them. It was a question I had to go away and ask myself. What they expressed was how the Caribbean was central to the development of other North American and British economics.”

Peter James Hudson: Good afternoon, everybody, wherever you are, whatever time you're at. My name is Peter James Hudson. I'm an associate professor of African American studies and history at the University of California, Los Angeles. I'm speaking with Javon Scott Lewis, the author of *Scammer's Yard: The Crime of Black Repair in Jamaica*. Javon, perhaps you could introduce yourself?

Jovan Scott Lewis: Sure. I'm Javon Scott Lewis. I am an assistant professor of geography and African American studies at the University of California, Berkeley. I have the pleasure of being here with you today, Peter, thanks for taking the time. And yes, I am the author of *Scammer's Yard: The Crime of Black Repair in Jamaica*. I'm really excited to talk about it today with you.

PJH: Wonderful. Well, it's good to be here with you, Javon. Let me say first off, congrats on the publication of *Scammers Yard*. It's going to be a really important intervention in anthropology and geography and Black and Caribbean studies. Also, I think in the history of capitalism. I think the one thing that strikes me about the book beyond those kinds of disciplinary and academic interventions is it's truly one of the most elegant ethnographies I think that I've ever read. It's a really beautiful piece of writing. And I wondered if you could just start by responding to two questions. First, two statements. One is, if you could give us a kind of very short summary of the book and its thesis, and then ask the big question, who are the scammers and what is the scam?

JSL: Yeah, thank you. So, *Scammers Yard* starts with a central curiosity, which is with this issue that I did not coin, but that I took from lived experience and articulation of that lived experience in Jamaica, which is this term called "sufferation." Sufferation in Jamaica is a way of understanding the world of hardship. It is, to my mind, an ontological concern, it is an ontological recognition. It is understanding the world not just for what it can be, but for what it is. And out of that is produced a whole series of ethics, approaches, and articulations, as I said earlier about how to make sense of it, how to navigate it. Being Jamaican, sufferation is a term, like I said, it comes out of this experience. I wanted to understand what it meant. I knew it meant something more than just suffering. And as you mentioned earlier, I do have these kinds of various disciplinary backgrounds and inspirations and in something like anthropology, there's a great deal of concern with what it means to suffer. We can think about a whole series of authors who work on that question. But something about this felt a little deeper in Jamaica because it was just understood. And so, I went to think about what sufferation was, how sufferation was experienced, how sufferation was navigated. And in that process, I understood that there was a broader political-economic story there. Sufferation wasn't just about the individual experience of politics; sufferation was about the totalizing context, the totalizing condition of that impoverishment, beyond the individual but, of course, encompassing the individual. And so, what that meant was looking at Jamaica's political-economic history, thinking from the plantation, thinking through the moment of independence, thinking through the moment of structural adjustment. The various moments that the Caribbean, but Jamaica specifically has sought, to emancipate itself from the kind of plantation moorings, of its history, into something more; it's a difficult process. It's an ongoing process. And so, the scam to me, starts with this question. Now, the departure for the

scammers, the departure for the scam, is that a lot of the previous approaches to sufferation—I mentioned a moment of emancipation, I mentioned the moment of independence—these are collectivist approaches that drew on a very specific set of ethics that we can think of as cooperation, the notion of rights and so forth. However, these have all seemed to have failed, or at least they've given very limited returns. And so, for the scam, there was a radical response to these circumstances, which didn't fall back on what we might gloss more broadly as a kind of respectability ethic, or respectability ethos. So, the scammers in many ways fully took up the ethics, if we want to call them that, of the kind of poststructural adjustment neoliberal moment in Jamaica where you have free trade zones slowly overtaking the tourist economy as far as business process outsourcing, call centers emerging in Montego Bay, post-2000, after the liberalization of Jamaica's telecommunications industry. These call centers are promising better wages, a better quality of life. However, companies like Amazon, companies like ACS, companies, like Vistaprint that are operating in Montego Bay are paying somewhere around a dollar an hour US. So, it's clear that as [Norman Girvan](#) called it, the rules of the game, meaning the rules that keep Jamaica and the Caribbean in a form of economic external dependence, were once again being perpetuated. So, the scammers, however, took the apparatus of the call center. And they found within it a novel means of seeking economic opportunity. And so, it's important to get to that point from within the context of sufferation, because the scammers who I worked with, what they wanted was an economic independence. So, that itself is also a radical departure in which the political aspirations are no longer the primary factor, the primary inspiration behind the kind of emancipatory thrust in Jamaica, but instead it is purely economic. So, what we do is we think about that. We think about what this means. So, the scammers using this business process outsourcing, call center protocols, practices, and I'll say a bit more about how they actually use them. They effectively earn a whole lot of money. Again, the economic thrust of their notions of independence bring them to a place where they begin to actually see their country, they see the Caribbean very differently; now, it becomes a space of opportunity rather than a space that requires departure for opportunity in terms of the kind of historical migration that we've seen from the Caribbean and Jamaica, specifically. And so, in many ways, the book moves from this notion of sufferation, grounding it historically, grounding it ethically; it carries it through to the contemporary moment after leaving the postemancipation moment. And in thinking about the contemporary moment, and thinking about the kinds of wealth that the scammers are able to earn, what the text eventually brings us to is

how the capacity to earn effectively functions as a form of repair. And so, in a very pithy way, I like to say that the book goes from sufferation to reparation by following the kind of political-economic arc of Jamaica from postemancipation. So, your second question about how the scam works—Peter, are you looking for work or something?—listen, times are hard. In 2000, Jamaica liberalized the telecommunications industry, largely for the purpose of attracting these what we would call offshore call centers to the country; in other words, they needed to build up the infrastructure. Jamaica, for the majority of its history, was controlled by a single telecommunications company, which was cable and wireless, which was the British kind of carryover from the colonial period. After liberalization, you had a series of players come onto the scene, the largest of which was [Digicel](#), which we know is one of the largest telecommunications, mobile phone, cellular data providers in the Caribbean. But after this infrastructure development that is made possible by the deregulation of the telecommunication industry, it allows for a whole host of data centers, customer service centers to show up in Montego Bay, specifically. They show up in Montego Bay because the [Montego Bay Free \[trade\] Zone \[MBFZ\]](#) has long been established for several decades as a site for other forms of free zone manufacture and so forth. The jobs that come, effectively, are not good enough. And what happens is that while these jobs are largely thought to be entry-level positions, they end up, ultimately, being largely occupied by university graduates. So, someone goes to the [The University of the West Indies, Mona](#), in Kingston, they end up working in the call center. So, what that means is that for your large, working-class population who may not have a university degree, these are no longer sites—these very quickly become sites that are not available for them to find this kind of opportunity. But the truth is that even within the call center, opportunity simply isn't adequate. The idea about what happens is important to the call center in one way, which is that what happens in the call center, is that there is this capacity to understand how North American commerce works. If we're thinking about the historical tourist trade in Montego Bay, there is a very specific and limited vantage point by which your local Jamaican is understanding, is perceiving the North American white tourist. It is unidirectional; the Jamaicans are there solely to provide a service. There's a form of opacity that I talk about that does not allow for a full sense of how North American and white capital works. However, in a call center, all of the anxieties that we all bring into a call center conversation, when that toy that you bought for your child hasn't arrived on time, or when you have missed a payment accidentally, or because of circumstances on your credit card, and you're calling a customer service agent. If you think about the relationships that are formed in

those moments, the kind of vulnerability that you as a customer bring to that conversation, you can only imagine what that means within the context of a customer service agent on the other end, what kind of education they're receiving about the kind of everyday concerns, anxieties, and vulnerabilities of North American capital. So, there's a sense of what people are kind of worried about, there's a sense about what people are aspiring for, that in a conventional tourist encounter wouldn't really be perceptible. But materially, what comes out of the call centers are lead lists—the names of these customers. I won't go into too much detail about how the scam gets started because there's a great deal of controversy actually about where the scam starts. But one thing we can say is that the scam as a form of practice does have a very foundational link to the practice of call center work. In fact, one of the scammers that I worked with had previously worked in a call center. This is the reason why the form of the scam that the crew that I worked with took a specific approach that it did. The way that that scam worked for the crew that I worked with, in the book I call them "the crew," and I identify with pseudonyms, of course, three main participants in the scam: Omar, Junior, and Dwayne. One of them worked in a call center, and as a result, the form of the scam was one in which they would call a potential victim and say, you have been overcharged for your A.P.R. for the past several years. You should have been paying seven percent. Have you been paying seven percent? Of course not. Okay, well, we owe you the difference. Wonderful. Well, the challenge is that in order to get a difference, we have to take fees, there might be some tax implications, and so, we need you to pay that upfront, and that's basically how it works. Through the process now, the scammers are using what I noted earlier as a kind of affected sensibility about how these citizens of the United States are thinking about credit, are thinking about their financial circumstances. And so, it does really disrupt the sense that somehow Americans are all inevitably wealthy, or very well off, but, in a contradictory manner, that doesn't matter. Because actually, the truth is that while many of us in the United States may be financially suffering, the argument can be had that nobody in the United States, in terms of the middle class, who we might consider white middle class individuals, are suffering as much as your poor, urban, Black Jamaican. And so, what happens is the victim will either send money to an agent who is somewhere else in the United States. So many scams have a network where other parties who are involved might be located in New York or might be located in North Carolina or Florida. And so, the victim sends money to that first point in the U.S., and then, that individual who receives the money then sends the money down to Jamaica. That's just one of multiple ways that the money is received. But the way that it's received in the majority sense, or

was received in the majority sense was through money transfer services, like Western Union and MoneyGram. Later on, you had the practice in which victims were advised to go to the nearby Walgreens or CVS to buy a [Green Dot debit card](#). I don't know if you're familiar with this. It's a debit card that you can load money on, and then to give that number to the scammer in Jamaica, and that's how they would receive payment. Larger crews who were bringing in significant enough cash would effectively resort to what we might consider conventional drug muling approaches where they would have people just bring cash down to Jamaica, which, of course, is not necessarily illegal. As long as you don't go over that \$10,000 U.S. limit. So, the scam works that way. There is nothing terribly sophisticated about the process of calling people. In fact, by the latter point of my research in Jamaica, while the crew that I worked with had used emerging telecommunications devices, apps and so forth, to call their victims, it was a kind of recognized, well-known phenomenon that individuals were simply buying international calling cards and just randomly calling U.S. numbers trying to scam people. So, in a way, there was something very unsophisticated about the premise. But the specific approach or the specific scenario that the scammers I worked with use, was in fact, very sophisticated in terms of trying to con people by striking at the heart of most American anxiety, which is our credit score.

PJH: Yeah, and I think one thing that your comments brought up—it really reminded me that one of the things that's quite incredible about the book is a really detailed, narrative arc of the history of Jamaican political economy. And that's a really wonderful resource for readers. But I wanted to ask you—you brought up this question of the kind of imbalances of power between the Jamaican scammer and the average white North American who may or may not be rich but would be rich in comparison to the subjects of your book, but this also comes up for you as an ethnographer. And I'm wondering, you talk a little bit in the book about your relationship to the crew, to Omar, Junior and Dwayne. And they bring you in as a Jamaican, but keep you at a distance because of class and color. And I'm wondering if you can say a little bit more about that and how that affected the research in the book.

JSL: Yeah, that's a really great question. And I'm smiling because of an incident that I'll share unrelated to the scam itself, but just the way that class and color work in Jamaica. So, a few things were at play that allowed me to kind of have access to these guys. And the question, when we were all meeting in person and doing stuff together as human beings, when I'd given previous talks about this

work at various department visits, the question always came up was, how did you get access to these people? And these were largely anthropologists, there was a question about ethnographic methodologies here. And so, one part of the issue is that or of the opportunity that facilitated my access was being a Jamaican. I'm from Montego Bay. I have family in Montego Bay. There was a sense of understanding and being recognized. Now, the other issue, and I think the biggest kind of opening was that technically, during my fieldwork, the scam wasn't what we would call officially illegal. It was, of course, illicit. It was, of course, unsanctioned. But the Jamaican government did not have any laws on the books that technically would allow for the kind of, you can be arrested, but not necessarily imprisoned for the scam. And so, for that reason, there was a great deal of openness about the practice. I kind of observed my first scammer while sitting on my grand-aunt's, Auntie Pinky's veranda there in Montego Bay. And a guy walks past the gate, and he sounds very peculiar. His voice is strange, his accent is strange. And I said to Auntie Pinky, "Auntie Pinky, who is that man, how come he sounds so weird?" [She said,] "My dear, he's just one of them scammers." I said, "Okay, all right, Auntie Pinky, thanks for identifying something so fascinating for me in this way." Like, he's just one of the guys who is in the neighborhood and who scams. There was nothing necessarily clandestine about the scam during the initial period of my fieldwork, which was from 2011 through 2012, up until January of 2013. And so, they were identifiable. That created an opening that allowed for my being Jamaican, to enable a kind of conversation. What was interesting, and especially as it comes up in the book, the scammers were trying to explain to me suffering. They were trying to explain to me poverty in a way that they thought that I couldn't understand because of my complexion, because in Jamaica, I am what they would call brown, what in the United States in the Black community would be called light-skinned. However, that racial encoding in the United States doesn't necessarily match up directly with Jamaica because of a great deal of class expectations and assumptions built into complexion and into color. The crew who were trying to explain to me suffering on the basis that I couldn't possibly understand it because I was brown. What that meant was not that I was prohibited from spending time with them. But in a way, it actually formalized the relationship in a way that, in this ethnographic maneuver, where we learn, especially in anthropology departments, that you should be learning from your interlocutors. There was something very specific that the crew wanted to teach me, which was about suffering or poverty's life. What it did was it gave me a certain kind of position within the relationship that I had with the members of the crew. Now, as far as not being

able to participate in certain things, I intentionally kept myself at a distance, because I knew that there were ethical questions about how much I could become party to, and I did make a choice to not become party to anything.

PJH: You weren't drug dealer for a day or anything like that.

JSL: You get it. I wasn't drug dealer for a day, I wasn't a scammer for a day. I think that process of ethnography, this idea of needing to embody the subjects that we quote study, wasn't my objective. My objective was to fully be able to receive and, through myself being an intermediary, to faithfully re-articulate and to state the experiences and the frameworks that these guys were kind of using to understand the world. But just to tell you this really quick joke, and I've been telling this to some of my classes when we talk, my Caribbean studies classes, when I was back home, and I was back in my neighborhood, I would walk to a nearby grocery store. Every day, I saw this guy watching me. He was sitting there at the corner of one intersection as I walked by every few days. He would watch me, and one day I said, "How come you keep watching me? Every day, I see you watching me." And he said, "Well, I'm just confused." I said, "Why are you confused?" He said, "I don't know what you are. Are you from here, or, are you a tourist?" I'm like, "Why would you think I'm a tourist?" He's like, "Well, because you're brown." I said, "Well, what does that mean?" He said, "Because every day, I see you walking, and brown people don't walk." I said, "Sorry." He said, "Brown people don't walk." I said, "What do you mean?" He said, "Brown people have a car, or at least you have fear for a taxi. But I don't see brown people walking. So, here, I see you as a brown man, and you're walking every day and I'm just confused [about] who you are. You must be a tourist, because you couldn't be from here." That's just one example of how race and class as a kind of embodied experience and practice is interestingly expressed and received in the country. And so, in a way, what my brownness, and because of my foreignness, effective foreignness brought to the crew was actually, a degree of—I was exotic in a way, to the crew, if I can be just straightforward. Here was a guy who is brown—I was at LSE [London School of Economics] doing my Ph.D., and this was part of my Ph.D. research, who was there, who had access to the same kinds of things that they had access to. And so, in a way, my being with them was a mark of an accomplishment because I had an iPhone 4, they had iPhone 4s. They would make fun of the fact that I wasn't actually up-to-date on all of the recent fashion trends. I mean, God knows why, but, all of Jamaica, Jamaican men especially, were wearing [Hollister](#) at the time. I don't know why, but I didn't have Hollister

shirts. I wasn't wearing [True Religion](#) jeans. I couldn't afford True Religion jeans even if I wanted to wear them. So, the point is that there was a kind of reputational element to the relationship and I think that was another aspect of why I was able to spend time with them in the way that I was. And so, that has everything to do with your very astute question, which is about the way that race and class, color—as a kind of catchall for those two things—actually works in the country, and it worked in my ethnography.

PJH: In Jamaica, I think this is in some ways typical of many parts of the Caribbean, where, I think of Jamaica with the national motto, “[Out of many people, one \[people\]](#),” but then [Walter Rodney](#) is always pointing out, Jamaica is 98 percent Black, so who are these many people we’re talking about? That motto becomes a way of—it’s a power move by the color elites because they’re worried that searching for this kind of Jamaican multiculturalism is a way of denying access to the sufferers to political power. The way in which you link sufferation to reparation, I'd like you to say a little bit more about that. I mean, the first thing for me is the idea of sufferation is a really incredible one, and on one level, it seems to have a kind of [Orlando Pattersonian Sisyphian](#) idea of nihilism. That kind of hopelessness of the Jamaican poor. But as you described, there's also this profound philosophical element of it. I mean, the way one accesses the knowledge and meaning, not just the knowledge but the meaning of sufferation through meditation, and then, through hope, like to understand your political-economic situation, one has to think through it. I wonder if you could say a little bit more about that and you're kind of emerging knowledge of that as an individual, but also in a kind of longer historical context. And then, the importance of reparation in this because I think that adds a whole other important element to the book. It's not just cataloging the deprivations of the poor; it’s about okay, this is a critique of capitalism, a critique of racial capitalism, a critique of structural adjustment, a critique of neoliberalism, a critique of the unbalanced relations between the United States and Jamaica, between the West and the Caribbean. Black people might not have found a way to destroy it, but they found a way to take from it as a form of reparation.

JSL: Yeah, absolutely. I think that last point that you made about finding a way through it, and utilizing it, it needs to actually be applied across the history of the Black experience in America. It's important to note that the plantation was an economic system. We think of it largely as political. We think of it as cultural. We think of it in this way that somehow simultaneously recognizes but elides the role

of economics in the process. And so, when we read about, say, plantation plots, for example, which are, of course, the small areas in the plantation that enslaved Africans in the Caribbean were allowed to use to cultivate their own food sources, because, of course, the plantation, didn't necessarily provide the everyday materials for life and sustenance. So, the idea that the plantation plot could be a thing that facilitates a whole host of processes. Being able to grow your own food means that you're able to create a kind of secondhand or secondary or what would really be a primary market within the plantation landscape. People like [Sidney Mintz](#) and [Sylvia Wynter](#) talk about how these plantation plots were instrumental to the formation of Caribbean economic systems, the notion of the Caribbean market. And so, in a way, I want to situate what the scammers are doing within that kind of tradition. Finding a space within the landscape of sufferation to make life. As we say, in Jamaica, and as the crew said, "make life" means to make life, literally, to make it, to find the instruments of self-provision, the instruments of self-fashioning, the instruments of self-determination; this is what making life is, and it doesn't necessarily have to occur after some grand revolutionary, some grand emancipatory moment. It happens within the context of subjugation. It happens within the plantation, and it happens within, as the scammers note, within the context of a global economic order that is meant to continue to extract value and profits from the lives and bodies of Black people. So, sufferation, as a philosophy, then, is—and you're right about the Orlando Pattersonian nihilism, I start the book saying, listen, [The Children of Sisyphus](#) was instrumental for me as a text. I read that text as a teenager. I read that text as a way of understanding the Caribbean condition. And it's important for those listening who want to think about Afro pessimism, go to that text and understand where some of Patterson's early thinking [came from]; he wrote that novel as an early twentysomething. Those ideas have had a very long life, and I won't go into that debate, but they've had a very long life and they've had a very long life for me in terms of thinking about how we narrate, how we illustrate the kind of condition of what we might call entrenched intergenerational structural poverty. It's important to note that it's different than the normative, say, economist or public policy specialist framing of poverty, which is as a failure of the economy. Or we need to do something to get the—what did Dave Chappelle call them, "[the](#) [poors](#)," back on track, to come up with a new program to get them educated. All of these ideas in which what poverty is understood as is as a fundamental deficiency in one's quality, subjective quality. And so I knew that that wasn't right. Black people around the world, and for my concern, in the Caribbean and Jamaica, more specifically, are brilliant. No, they're not poor because of any kind

of individual deficiency or any cultural deficiency; something systemic is going on. And so, something like sufferation helps to explain that. Something like sufferation says, listen, if you go to [Delroy Wilson's *Better Must Come*](#), there's a 1971 song that was used largely by [Michael Manly's](#) political campaign that year. The lyrics go, "I've been trying so hard and still I can't make it/Everything that I do seems to go wrong/But who God bless, no man curse. /Thank God that is not the worst/Better must come."

[“I've been trying a long, long time still I didn't make it/Everything I try to do seems to go wrong/It seems I have done something wrong/But they're trying to keep me down/Who God bless, no one curse/Thank God I'm not the worst/Better must come one day.”]

That very brief lyric is a phenomenal and perfect representation of what sufferation is and how it is understood. This ability to constantly try and to not have progress. In the book, there's a quote from Junior, and he says, look, I'm a youth with intelligence. How come things aren't working out for me? He recognizes that he has the capacity, he recognizes his innate ability to be wealthy, to be satisfied in these ways, and he can't be and so the problem isn't with him. The problem is with the system, the problem is with the world, which as an old Jamaican aphorism goes, [the Jackass says that the world isn't level](#), so sufferation starts with the recognition, it starts with, listen, we understand that this is the way the world is, we have a choice. We can weep and wail and gnash our teeth, rent our clothes, these kinds of things, or we can actually find a way through. And so, sufferation is not pessimistic, sufferation is pragmatic. Sufferation is a recognition that the system is, as the reggae artist [Popcaan](#) says, designed to set people up, but it is something that can be navigated. That's what sufferation is as a kind of practice. And this is rooted in what the [anthropologist Diane Austin](#) called the eudaimonic hope that comes out of West African religious traditions.

PJH: And so on one level, on one hand, we have sufferation, but then you cut through it, and oppose it with with reparation. Talk a little bit about that.

JSL: I wanted to understand what this all meant; if a good opportunity looks like a dollar an hour working at Amazon's call center, what does it actually mean as a scammer to bring in \$10,000 U.S. in a month, \$15,000 U.S. in another month? And I'll say this that, not every month, at least not for the crew I spent time with, not every month was \$10,000, \$15,000, but it did come, it did happen. I wanted

to understand what did it mean? Because I saw what it did. I saw that for members of the crew, what happened was, okay, well, guess what, now, the son, or the youths, for one of them, is now going to private school, now taking swimming and Spanish lessons. There is a kind of interesting kinship reaction, where the partner, the child's mother, is somehow not quarreling with Junior as much or with Dwayne as much. Things are happening. A car is being purchased, a second car is purchased or a piece of land is being bought just outside of Montego Bay and a house is being built. There was something so radical, Peter, to what this money did for these men that I needed to understand two things. I needed to understand what that money meant to them. So, I saw what it did. I wanted to know what it meant to them, but I also wanted to know what it meant to get it the way that they got it. I wanted to know what it meant for them to effectively be stealing this money, but for the money to have such meaningful consequence for their lives. A part of that was asking, well, how do you feel about the scam? How do you feel about stealing from people who are largely elderly, white, North Americans, people who are in their eighties, and sometimes, in their nineties. And out of that, there was a whole host of very fascinating and unexpected responses from the crew. The one was that, the year that I was in Jamaica was 2012. A couple of things had been happening, right? [CARICOM Reparations Commission] [CARICOM](#) had begun its own kind of reparations commission. There was a great deal of discussion about reparations in the political class in Jamaica, and again, across the Caribbean. But perhaps most importantly, [Vybz Kartel](#), the infamous dancehall reggae artist, had come up with a song that year called [Reparation](#). It was effectively an articulation of how Jamaicans should understand what the scam does and what it means. And it was like, as long as there's no violence, as long as they are doing good things, there's nothing wrong with the scam. The chorus went on to say that “them call it scam, but we call it reparation. Every ghetto youth is a star, and so they just want to live like one.”

[“Dem call it scam/Mi call it reparation/Every ghetto yute is a star (Yow yow!)/So dem wah live like one (one one...)”]

I'm just like sitting with this and like, okay, that's interesting. I was aware of the song. I asked the crew members, why is scamming okay, effectively? I asked it in a very much more precise way than that. And I have a whole piece in the book where I talk about asking moral-versus-ethical questions and what they allow for. Without going into that effectively, I asked, please help me explain, how are you able, from an ethical standpoint, to do this crime? And the response was, didn't

Vybz Kartel, tell us? It's reparations. And I was like, okay, that's super convenient. I think one might be inclined to dismiss because the song was out that year. Because it was a convenient framework for the scam. A convenient justification, fundamentally. But I decided to take it seriously. And I made a decision for a few things. Well, for a few reasons. And one is, well, listen, when you're thinking about the Caribbean, when you're thinking about Caribbean studies, Caribbean history, Caribbean literature, popular culture is the epicenter. It's the modality by which Caribbean social theory is facilitated. You cannot separate that when you're thinking about the kind of experience of the Caribbean. And so, the fact that [Vybz] Kartel, could make this declaration and the fact that it resonated, however conveniently with the crew members, meant that it was legitimate. It was legitimate because throughout the process, throughout my time with the crew, they would constantly refer to other kinds of music, largely North American hip-hop. [Rick Ross](#) was actually the crew's favorite artist because he embodied this now-classic trope of a kind of hip-hop arc where a hustler goes from hustling to the end of the rainbow, is like some kind of multimedia mogul. We can think of [Jay-Z](#). We can think of a whole host of characters who fit that mold. Rick Ross was one of the latest individuals. And he spoke to the crew. He spoke to their kind of ethos. And so Vybz Kartel fit in a very similar way. And he was asking for Jamaican society to understand the inputs into the scam, meaning poverty, but also how the scam facilitated some of the broader aspirations, not only of the individuals who are scamming, but of society themselves. Like sending your sister to college and buying a house for your mother and all of these kinds of things. So, then here I am saying, okay, well, let me take this reparations thing seriously. I had to say, well, okay, if this is reparations, how is it possible that the history of colonialism, the history of slavery in the Caribbean has effectively, but not entirely been one orchestrated by the British colonial powers. We can't forget the Spanish origins of Jamaica and Jamaican colonialism. How is it possible that an elderly person in Bismarck, North Dakota, is somehow responsible for reparations? And one of the crew members replied with a very pithy, but poignant and powerful response, which is that they're the same white people. And I was like, oh, okay. All right. How are they the same white people. And that was a question that I put to them, and it was a question I had to go away and ask myself. And what they expressed was how the Caribbean was central to the development of other North American and British economics. And I say that in a way that sounds really dry, but how they put it was like, we let them have what they have. And in that was a whole sense of more recent history of Jamaica and political economy, where we could track the sentiments of these young men to the

poststructural adjustment period, meaning from 1977 onwards, where North America begins to have an overdeterministic influence on Jamaica's circumstances and Jamaica's political-economic realities, many of which have directly and meaningfully impacted the lives of these young men. And so, I decided to take that as a way of thinking about what are the possibilities for reparations, what are the possibilities for repair if we take their political, if you can call them that political articulation, their sensibilities, their frameworks around this geopolitical, political-economic history, and we marry that to the capacity to purchase, to materially remake their lives. Then, thinking about these two things together actually forms a question and I believe an answer for the matter of reparations or at least repair. And so, understanding that as a form of reparations policy and we tend to only think about reparations as policy and not about the kind of affective, subjective, personal consequence of what that policy is meant to do. I thought about repair as being something that needed to be prioritized over reparations. Meaning, I don't think that reparations is going to be a process by which we raid the banks of US private citizens or white US private citizens, specifically. But what the scammers helped me understand was that reparations, as its quality, which I'm calling repair—repair being the quality of reparations—has to take into consideration the very messy and tangled colonial histories that are not neat, linear kind of inheritances within the idea of the United States, within the idea of France, within the idea of Great Britain. The process of colonialism, the process of slavery was a global affair that had lots of different parties playing a variety of roles to different degrees, depending on where their literal investments were. But there was a great deal of entangled processes that gave us the global trade in African slaves and the centuries of slavery and colonialism that followed. And these scammers recognize that.

PJH: It seems to me that they have a very, very acute and implicit sense of global white supremacy, effectively, and their location in the political economy of global white supremacy. I wanted to ask two more questions about the reparations piece, though. And the first is, and I think you've begun to answer this, but how would you say, specifically, you see *Scammers Yard* contributing to CARICOM discourse of reparations and the work of [Sir Hilary Beckles](#) and [professor Verene Shepherd](#) at [The University of the West Indies](#), who really tried to push this agenda. And I think one of the points that in the CARICOM platform is around psychic repair, which you touch on. And the second question is, it seems to me that there's a certain divergence in the narrative of Black redemption that's been a part of, if you want to use the phrase, emancipatory narratives of Jamaica and

one that you know very, very well in terms of the iconography and philosophy of [Rastafarianism](#) and the idea of repatriation, a return to Africa, because now it seems like Africa and the Pan African impulsive Rastafarianism doesn't seem to be at all present in the discourse of repair of the scammers. So, I'm wondering if you could say something, if you have any thoughts on that, on the position of Rasta at this moment, in this discussion and the very specific ways you see your book engaging with the CARICOM reparations movement.

JSL: I think what the book can offer to CRC, but also the ongoing debates around reparations in the United States and elsewhere in the world is that you have to start with the people. What we have is a whole host of these platforms. It's controversial to say so, but they really are kind of like top-down approaches to the questions of reparations. In other words, the issue that drives many of these global programs—I'm sorry, not global programs, there's no global program for reparations in terms of actual political interest or investment—but meaning, the various programs for reparations platforms, policy proposals that exist in various countries is that they, in a very obvious way, are directed to help edify the society through the subject's development. I think the CRC has a ten-point platform. They have repatriation for people who want it in their program. They have this question of psychic repair and having that kind of assistance and providing services for living through the kind of histories of trauma. Importantly, there is a health component. Because it's important to note that injury lives in the bodies of Black people, to the degree of insulin resistance, for example. And this is something that I've seen professor Sir Hilary Beckles talk about in person, about the way that the insulin and insulin medicine and diabetes medicine that exists is less effective for Afro Caribbean people because as he argued, the centuries of overconsumption of sugar on the cane plantations. As an idea, I'm not sure exactly. But beyond these very interesting and novel, and I think, really important interventions, the general thrust of so many of these policy proposals are effectively, individual citizenship development that will ultimately go on to serve the nation. And so earlier, you talked about “Out of many, one people,” the Creole nationalist motto of Jamaica. So, what we see is that the kind of reparations programs that are being advanced are effectively meant to service that notion of society, that notion of the nation rather than mandating education, rather than mandating certain kinds of social services. What the scammers demonstrated to me, and I think this is actually controversial because I don't want to help reify a kind of respectability politics here. But if we think about what the scammers did with the money that they received, as I mentioned, they put their kids in private

school. They gave their kids Spanish lessons. They gave their kids swimming lessons. They built a house. They bought land. These are the kind of instruments of intergenerational wealth and opportunity that were facilitated without any form of reparations program, but were facilitated without any kind of government mandate. In other words, what the scammers showed me was that repair is being able to actually fulfill on your own terms the emancipatory, redemptive, if you want to call it that, ethos or thrust or aspiration. But one does require the means to do so. And that's the issue that's at the heart of reparations is the scalability of these opportunities. And that's what makes it challenging. So, what I would love for folks to take away, folks who are thinking about reparations is that there is a great deal of capacity and capability in individuals to understand what is best for them and their families and for their communities, if we are going to demand that they be concerned with their communities, because that's a whole other question as well. And given the means to do so, they will actually care for themselves, and moreover, reparations, the facilitation, the provision of these kinds of things, and we can talk about in the United States here, the provision of these kinds of things don't need to necessarily come as a form of reparations, because we know that especially United States history, the provision of social housing (and I don't mean Section 8 housing), but I'm talking about the kind of subsidization of the development of the suburbs and these kinds of things, have all been facilitated by the government. They never have been understood in their provision to be a form of reparations. So, in other words, what I am worried about is that these programs, these platforms will attempt to give Black citizens, wherever they may be, what are effectively, normative and to be expected services and provisions by the state. But calling them reparations, in a way, undermines the actual debt that is owed to these people, which should be separate from the ability to access adequate health care, from the ability to access adequate and beneficial education, from the ability to access the market, to buy a home, to have job opportunities. The problem is that these everyday things are being framed by so many of these proposals as reparations, and they're not reparations. Reparations is something separate from that. What was the other question, Peter, I forgot?

PJH: Well, I mean, first of all, thank you for that. That's a really smart and brilliant response. It's not simply that they're getting reparations. They're getting what they have always deserved, what we have always deserved. But I think the other question is, how do you frame this in relationship to the Rastafarian discourse of repatriation that emerges out of the global movement of Pan

Africanism from Rasta to [\[Marcus\] Garvey](#) to this kind of thing. How does this diverge or converge with that kind of discourse?

JSL: Yeah. Well, that's how I know you and I can be friends forever. Because you asked me a question about repatriation. The scammer position is that those ethical impulses have passed. The idea of the notion of a kind of political liberation, a kind of Pan African liberation, as far as the scammers are concerned, is no longer. So, they've opted out. They've opted out of this progressive narrative of liberation. They've seen what it does. They've seen what the past 50-plus years of Jamaican independence has wrought. They saw what happened between 1834 and 1962 in Jamaica. And so, in many ways, they've opted out of that. Now, to pull back from that, and to think about how this fits more generally within a question of Pan Africanist philosophy, Pan Africanist politics, what the question of sufferation does is it demonstrates a kind of universal, global, Black, political economy. Sufferation is not specific to Jamaica. Sufferation is something that I'm actually looking at in a different way but in the United States today. We can see the connections between the justifications for Jamaicans scamming North Americans to Nigerian oil pirates who are attacking the [Shell](#) refineries and stealing oil and doing that kind of thing—they're recognizing the way that, as you called it earlier and rightfully so, white supremacist political and economic order works. Now, what that has to offer, as far as a question for repair reparations, is that there is this need to reconcile what we might consider the converse to the white supremacist order. What we might need to do is reconcile the global notion of Blackness, because what the scammers point to, I think, is a worrying trend, which is that people are opting out, effectively, of a global Black politics. And you see that happening in a variety of ways: the rise in the United States of the [ADOS movement, American Descendants of Slave\[ry\] for reparations](#). While there is an investment in a particular kind of politics, and I don't say that the scammers have the same kind of politics, but what we see is there's an opting out of the global sensibility and the practical concern of Blackness that's rooted in a global recognition. And so, to my mind, that's a great vulnerability, and that's a great worry. Now, to bring up repatriation, to bring up [\[Marcus\] Garvey](#), is a way of centering continental Africa in this global order. And I think that does need to happen. It struck me that we are heavily invested into the repair of our relationship with settler colonial spaces that Black people have come occupy over the past centuries. Yet by comparison, very little work has been done to repair the relationships between Africans and the diaspora. As Garvey put it, Africans at home and Africans abroad. Something needs to happen in that regard. And so, as

far as the book is concerned, the scammers in the book are a symptom of a failure of our global Black politics, because left to the individual nationalist kind of concerns, they are, effectively, insufficient. And that's been the kind of proof that we've continued to live through. And we're continuing to live through every day in North America with the kind of wanton, anti-Black state violence that we continue to be bombarded with. Now, as far as Rastafarians, they have long had a view. I'm glad I'm able to share this here. I grew up as a Rasta youth, and the things that I grew up understanding Rastafaric, Rastafari advocate for, I'm seeing the need to advocate for them still, but I'm seeing a will to advocate for them now. When we're thinking about politics that is inherently anti-colonial, when we're thinking about the selling of various monuments, when we're thinking about the discursive reordering of the world that we've seen post-BLM, these are all the things that Rastafari have been advocating for since the 1930s, albeit within a theological framework, but still a politically oriented theological framework. Now, what Rastafari is thinking about today in terms of repatriation is a far cry from people like [Prince Emmanuel Charles Edwards](#) in the 1950s, from some of those early groups that went to Shashamene in Ethiopia a little bit later, so the idea of repatriation now is a question that we haven't given enough attention to. My sense at the moment is that repatriation is about thinking about these relationships. It is about finding our global Black communities once again in communion with groups and communities on the continent that are invested in those kinds of Black politics. And I'm not generalizing or trying to gloss over the multiple complications. And, in fact, we're seeing what's happening in Ethiopia. We're seeing what's happening in Nigeria. So, it is still very complicated. But again, as I said earlier, it seems as if we've been giving a lot of attention to working through those complications out here in the West. And we've been given very little time to think through those complications within the relations that Africans in the West have with those on the continent.

PJH: I think that's really brilliant. I think [Angela Davis said something along the lines of “freedom is a constant struggle.”](#) But I think making those Pan African connections is also a constant struggle. I was thinking as you were talking about [George Padmore](#), the Trinidadian Pan Africanist, in 1929, while he was still a member of the Communist Party, he wrote [The Life and Struggles of Negro Toilers](#), which the importance of that book is precisely the kinds of connections that you're making. So, he's looking, during the crisis of capitalism of the late 1920s and the 1930s, at not only the modes of colonial governance that are affecting Black people in the Caribbean, in North America, in all parts of Africa.

But he's looking at all of the kind of uprisings and forms of organization that are challenging that. But this is really one of the first books that makes those connections. And I think it's striking that we haven't seen contemporary books as Black Lives Matter and anti-police brutality movements expand across the Black world, as people are involved in the kind of scams that you're talking about. As you put it, both the scams and the claims for reparation in the United States, in Jamaica, in other places. I think in some ways, it's our work to make those connections real and to narrativize those connections. I think you've already begun to do that. I want to ask two, or one, two-part, final question. And I think I love these two-part final questions. One of the things that most impresses me about what you've done in *Scammers Yard* is and it's a certain kind of difficulty that is close to my heart, which is the difficulty of writing about the Caribbean as a very specific and nuanced place in the midst of the US academy, where it's the Caribbean is often subsumed to Latin America or to the diaspora writ large, if it's ever talked about at all. It's difficult, sometimes, to even find the space to teach classes on the Caribbean, let alone on Jamaica as a specific place. And so, I wanted to ask you about your genealogies of Caribbean studies and the importance of Caribbean studies for you. And specifically, I mean, two genealogies. One is, is through people like Norman Girvan, who you mentioned early on and the role of the [New World Group](#), the kind of work of Caribbean political economy that they put forth. How do you see yourself in relationship to it? What are your critiques of it? How do you break from it? And I think the second person and I guess this is the second part of the question is in relationship to a tradition of Caribbeanist anthropology, and I'm thinking specifically about the work of [Faye Harrison](#), who's done so much work on structural adjustment in Jamaica, specifically, around gender and structural adjustment and women's labor. And I'm wondering if you could talk about them both, the New World Group in whatever way you can, but also Faye Harrison's work and how you've thought, and I think you've answered this kind of indirectly, but how you thought about gender through the book.

JSL: Yeah, to your introductory comment before the two questions: You're right that there is and I think it's part of the answer as well. So, I'll start there. But it is about finding space to think about the Caribbean in a way that doesn't fall back on the kind of cold war regionalism that gave it some relevance or gave it some of its conventional academic relevance. It's about thinking about the Caribbean as a site specifically for the Black condition and understanding the Black condition.

And that's been part of the biggest challenge is the decentering of Blackness. Or the peculiar positioning of Blackness, where its epicenter is North America and everything else is seen as a variation of that. And so, I've very adamantly been a supporter of Caribbeanist work within the academy, meaning, I teach Caribbean stuff even if I'm not able to teach a Caribbean class. Caribbean thought is Black thought. If we're thinking about so many of the Black writers who have been at the fore of Black studies, but who are in this very moment critical if you're thinking about Black studies. You mentioned Walter Rodney earlier, we talk about Sylvia Wynter, [Stuart Hall](#), [C.L.R. James](#), you mentioned George Padmore. These are all people, [Frantz Fanon](#), etc., that somehow get taken up in Black studies without necessarily their geographic kind of formations coming along with them. There's this interesting extraction of Black thought out of the Caribbean that leaves the Caribbean behind. And it's really frustrating, frankly. And so, something like *Scammers Yard*, I don't know, I think it's a lovely book. It's got very fantastic colors on it. But I'm worried that in Black studies it looks like a book that's only meant for people who are interested in Jamaica or the Caribbean. Yet, we fail to recognize again the deep intimacies between the geographic forms of Blackness that exist. So, I say that as a kind of prefatory comment to the specific tradition. As I said earlier, I'm a Rasta youth. I grew up as a Rasta youth, and so I grew up with the intellectual tradition that preceded the academy in a way. And so for that, I really never had any kind of allegiance to any proper intellectual tradition as we see it coming out of the academy. Rastafari, we do a thing called reasoning, which is, again, a kind of praxis of deep intellectual inquiry and debate. And so, I wanted to say formally and on record that that is my intellectual tradition, Rastafari is my intellectual tradition. Everything beyond that is about taking the framework of liberation and taking the framework and love of Blackness and Black people that that intellectual tradition of Rastafari gave me. And finding the necessary tools to produce understanding and to contribute to the kind of progress of Blackness, the idea in the Caribbean of somehow separating. And so, we can go and think about the Caribbean tradition, specifically. So, the idea in the Caribbean of somehow separating political economy from culture. You see this especially in North American academy, [it] isn't necessarily as easy. I mean, it's done. And there's a literary tradition by which I mean literary scholarship and novels and so forth that have always been at the heart of of Caribbean discourse, intellectual discourse. And so, as a result, one has to pay attention to both the structural and the affective, the kind of political and the cultural to use terms to help clarify my distinctions. So the New World Group were a set of individuals who mostly, if not

all economists who were thinking about the Caribbean in a way along a pathway that to my mind, was parallel to the kind of cultural analyses that were happening. I couldn't separate. When you're thinking about something like sufferation, which is an economic condition, you can't separate the economic from the cultural, the political economic from the culture. And so for me, it was necessary to think through the work of the New World Group, people like Girvan, people like [Lloyd Best](#). Because they were providing a kind of economic and structural analysis of what brought about the kind of circumstances of Caribbean structural impoverishment, people like [George Beckford](#), etc., but there was something inherently poetic. There was something inherently qualitatively illuminating about the work that they were doing. When Lloyd Best, for example, takes us through a series of Black plantation hinterlands, what you see are the consequences on the conditions for a variety of lived experiences. These are not just purely economic processes or economic conditions that people are living within or political formations of settler plantation economies. But they are the geographic bases for which people begin to construct themselves and to understand themselves and living in response to that. So, for me, there is a divergence, I suppose, in me using that work or their work in that way. What I do try and make sure that I do is always to make the point that there is an economic analysis at the foundation of this work. And so, in that way, it's very similar. I also take my cues from Sylvia Wynter, who to my mind is one of our most deft economic thinkers. And how do you not understand the economy by thinking with Wynter or reading Wynter. So, for me, I think the departure, if there's a departure, if there's a kind of break with that tradition, it is in trying to think about the subjective qualities of lives lived within the circumstances that these theorists think about. And so, thinking about Faye Harrison, what's wonderful is that Faye is a Caribbeanist and is one of these Caribbeanists that we don't always think of as a Caribbeanist in this way that people get subsumed into the Black studies structure. And we can, again, go back to this earlier point that I mentioned about extraction, extracting the kind of intellectual insights about Black life without necessarily bringing along the kind of geographic and political and economic circumstances with them. The questions of gender and structural adjustment, Faye, people like [Beverley Mullings](#), people like Carla Freeman and Thomas, there's scores of academics who are thinking so importantly about the question of race and gender within similar circumstances that I'm interested in, that I take up in *Scammers Yard*. The question of gender for *Scammers Yard* is a question about masculinity. Sufferation for the crew was the fear of being assigned as being worthless. I talk about the question of worthlessness in the

book and worthlessness is something that another figure who I look to as a lodestar in how to do this work is [Barry Chevannes](#) and who talked about the kind of intersections of masculinity, culture and political economy. The issue of worthlessness is about a fear of lacking value in your community, within the kind of structures of your kinship, within society. And so, sufferation as a particularly masculinist practice is worthlessness and it is a condition that Jamaican men seek to avoid at all costs. And it seems as if for the group that I worked with, their cost was participating in this international lottery scam. So for me, it does really go back to your earlier invocation of Rastafari. What I understand is that Rastafari understands and tries to express that the global condition of Blackness is one in which violence that was both literal and epistemic and spiritual did everything that it could to dehumanize African individuals to the point of making them tools or apparatuses of colonial economic production. The thing that Rastafari really shows is that that ongoing violence as an epistemic form is pervasive. It is mutable. It is ever-evolving. And what we have to do is we have to have a kind of very clear sense of how the way that that world works. And so, Rastafari says listen, white Jesus and the queen of England are the same kind of evil, for example. That could be dismissed as some kind of theological preoccupation. But it is about understanding white supremacy in, as Rastafari says, high and low places. It is not just about the structures of the state. It is about everyday discursive speech. It is about the way that we bring certain realities into existence. And we weaponize them through speech, weaponize them through our everyday practices of consumption and our choices and the way that we regard one another. And so, for me, again, trying to attend to that core objective, if I can call it that, everything has been a kind of seeking for the tools, seeking for the language, seeking for the kind of networks and kinship networks, specifically for thinking about the intellectual tradition as being a network of kinship, building on the work of others, contributing to the work of others. That's very intimate and important work. It has been in the service of this core objective.

PJH: I asked you about the traditions of Caribbean political economy, but as you've answered, we realize that the traditions of Caribbean political economy are really always, from the get-go, turned on their head. And I think that point that you're making of having to move from a narrow sense of the political-economic into the realm of the novel, into the realm of poetics, into the realm of larger ethical and affective questions, really shapes what that tradition, that intellectual genealogy looks like. And I always feel that it's often the poets, the novelists, the

songsters, etc., who are better able to write about the economics of the region than the trained economists. But I think one thing that *Scammers Yard* also does for us—and I don't think I understood that until you spoke—and I think it's around the idea of reasoning as your intellectual tradition, your kind of disciplinary formation if you want to use that kind of language. What I felt while reading the book but didn't understand until you said that is that sense of reasoning, that mode of inquiry, that mode of ethical inquiry pervades the book. And in many ways, the book reminds me of Walter Rodney's [*The Groundings with My Brothers*](#), which also comes out with that very basic question or that very core sentiment of on one level, care also of not just listening and obviously, of grounding. And where his interlocutors are more important than him as an author. And it creates a very, very special and specific tenor within the text, which I think is so important but also so rare in academic texts. So, for me, *Scammers Yard* is incredible because it exceeds what we would expect from a regular academic text and because we can feel that kind of love and that ethic running through it as a form of critical political economy. So, Javon Scott Lewis, University of California, Berkeley, professor, author of *Scammers Yard: The Crime of Black Repair in Jamaica*, Rasta youth, it's been good to ground with you this afternoon. It's a wonderful book, and I hope we can keep talking about it.

JSL: Yeah, Peter. Thank you so much, man. It's a rare occasion to have someone take such a sensitive read of the book, as you've done, an astute read, as one would expect Peter James Hudson to do. I think what you just said, the last bit is exactly right. It is a work of love. It's a work of Black love specifically. And I appreciate your time.

PJH: I appreciate it, man. I hope to talk soon.

JSL: Thanks, Peter.