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A Tale of Too Many Cities: The Clash's 'Ghetto Defendant' and Transnational Disruptions

If anyone remains in any doubt that Joe Strummer fancied himself as something of a Beat, then he or she need only look at the photograph adorning the cover of the lyrics booklet in *The Clash on Broadway* box set (1991). The Clash's very own gutter poet sits at a table in a room which is otherwise bare. His tie is artfully loosened, he has a cigarette in his mouth, his hair is greased and expertly quiffed. The visual echoes of Jack Kerouac are unmistakable, yet the absolute clincher is the long scroll of paper upon which Strummer is spontaneously pouring forth his lyrics. Deftly, the image speaks of Strummer's rebellious cool, his dedication to his art, and his prolificacy, all characteristics he shared with Kerouac.

Though on The Clash's eponymous debut album he famously claimed, in the interests of defining his place and time as a radical break with the past, to be bored with the U.S.A., Strummer's lyrics on later albums showed an increasing fascination with the place, and he clearly felt an affiliation for the restless protesters of twentieth-century American culture. In the early seventies, for example, he insisted on being called 'Woody' in tribute to Woody Guthrie, whose depictions of working-class masculinity became a significant influence on both the style and the ethics of the Beats (Lawlor 343). Much later, his contribution to the Kerouac tribute album *Kicks Joy Darkness* (1997), in which he played along to a live reading of 'MacDougal Street Blues, Cantos Dos', represented an explicit acknowledgement of Kerouac's influence. And if the whisky and spliff-fuelled night at William Burroughs's home on The Bowery is little more than an intriguing anecdote (Salewicz 290), a second New York encounter with another legendary Beat, Allen Ginsberg, led to what is, in this listener's opinion, one of The Clash's most complex and compelling songs. On 10 June 1981, Ginsberg joined the band on stage at Bond's in New York to perform 'Capitol Air', described by

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Ginsberg as ‘a poem that has chord changes’ (qtd. in Salewicz 320). Soon afterwards, the band invited the poet to Electric Lady Studios in New York, where he collaborated on the lyrics to ‘Ghetto Defendant’, as well as contributing the ‘Voice of God’. If the extent to which ‘the greatest poet in America’ (Strummer, qtd. in Salewicz 327) acted as Strummer’s lyric coach on *Combat Rock* remains a point of contention—Strummer is believed to have said, ‘I asked Ginsberg for a word once but it was just one word’ (qtd. in Salewicz 327)—there is no doubt that the contribution of the American augments the ambitious and urgent globalism of ‘Ghetto Defendant’. With its determinedly transnational outlook; its bitter portrayal of misguided and baleful leadership and corrupt institutions; and its insistence on drawing attention to the local effects of global economic and political forces, the track can be regarded as a close relative of The Clash’s more polemical and ‘jaundiced’ attack on U.S. foreign policy, ‘Washington Bullets’ (Topping 140), and, more distantly, Ginsberg’s ironic ode to CIA drug trafficking in South-East Asia, ‘CIA Dope Calypso’.

Ginsberg’s own passion for music has already been well documented in various critical biographies. The strong link between the form and phrasing of *Howl* and jazz music is but one famous example of it; the 1959 recording of the poem was described by Ginsberg as a ‘jazz mass’ (qtd. in Morgan 216). It can also clearly be seen in the enthusiasm with which he celebrates the ‘young minstrels’ of the sixties such as Bob Dylan, The Byrds and The Beatles, improvising prophets whose return to ‘song forms’ of poetry and ‘mantra repetition’ link them to ‘inspired creators like Shiva Krishna Chaitanya Mirabai and Ramakrishna’ (‘Metamorphoses’ 259). Although, as Bill Morgan notes, ‘he was never enthusiastic about practicing’ the violin and piano as a young boy (Morgan 17) and entered adult life with little or no formal knowledge of musical notation or composition, Ginsberg wrote and performed songs throughout his career, frequently accompanying the vocals with simple harmonium chords, and made a number of recordings. If Michael Schumacher is to be believed, it was Ginsberg’s surprising lack of confidence in his ability to write lyrics that led to the use of William Blake’s *Songs of Innocence and Experience* on the first of these recordings (Schumacher 523). With the help of John Hammond and Bob Dylan as ‘musical consultant’ (Morgan 482), Ginsberg subsequently recorded a number of his own songs during the seventies, including ‘Father Death Blues’, ‘CIA Dope Calypso’ and ‘Stay Away from White House’; they were eventually released on John Hammond’s label as *First Blues* in 1983. In fact, Bill Morgan goes as far as to say that Ginsberg long ‘dreamed of becoming a rock ‘n’ roll star’

(Morgan 549) despite his limited instrumental skills and untrained, even mediocre voice. Morgan's view is borne out by the poet's joyous declaration after the Bond's performance with The Clash: 'I can die happy having satisfied my shop girl ambitions!' (qtd. in Morgan 549).

Ginsberg had been making spoken-word recordings since *Howl and Other Poems* in 1959, and it is his deadpan spoken words as the 'Voice of God', contrasting heavily with Strummer's impassioned strains, from which 'Ghetto Defendant' derives much of its power. Less that of a traditional God, in fact, than the articulation of a global moral and political conscience, his voice emerges, flatly intoned and usually without the excessive reverb applied to Strummer's vocal track, left of centre and toward the front of the mix. Listened to in headphones, it seems to emerge from within the mind of the listener as an immanent observer of and commentator on ghetto degradation and international conflict. The almost wilful obscurity of some of Ginsberg's lines, moreover, imbues them with a lyric sensibility and thus acknowledges and echoes the poetic style of Jean Arthur Rimbaud, who is evoked in the third verse of the song.

My introductory remarks on Joe Strummer's encounters with Beat culture are precisely that—introductory remarks designed to lend the song some contextual colour—and I am aware that they raise more questions than answers. If, for example, the move from Kerouac to Ginsberg, two quite disparate figures, appears to be made somewhat unproblematically in the opening paragraphs, then let me make two points in my defence, the first rather frivolous, perhaps, the second more substantive. The first is this: the collaboration between Strummer and Ginsberg was a fortuitous one. It allowed the poet to fulfil certain 'shop girl ambitions' and helped Strummer cement his position as a countercultural icon, but it is by no means clear that it *had* to be Ginsberg, despite Salewicz's claim that following their visit to the City Lights bookstore in 1978, this was a 'seminal moment' for Strummer and Mick Jones (319). To put it crudely, one might say that had historical circumstances been different, Kerouac might just as well have done the job.

The second related point concerns Beat 'influence' more generally. In saying that Kerouac could have stepped in, I am suggesting that Strummer's initial interest was in a *myth* of Beatdom which, while not totally ignorant of the differences in the key Beat figures' literary style and outlook, might have been inclined to overlook historical specificities in favour of timeless and seductive ideas of poet or novelist as rebel, free-thinker, spontaneous creator and rock 'n' roll agitator (with a great quaff). In other words, it probably did not matter to Strummer whether the

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Ginsberg with whom he worked was the fifties libertine, the sixties countercultural spokesman, the Buddhist meditator or the left-wing political campaigner (there is in fact evidence of all of these Ginsbergs on 'Ghetto Defendant'); the most significant fact was simply his status as a famous Beat. So the collaboration served partly as confirmation of the 'literary sources [that] turned out to be firmly although implicitly inscribed in the aesthetics of British punk' (Hebdige 28), but more importantly it allowed Strummer to be seen to inherit a Beat sensibility, whether or not it accurately reflected the diverse reality of the movement, and to bring an iconic insider's expression to bear on his obsessions with U.S. imperialism at the time.

So my main aim in this essay is not, in fact, to trace the influence of Beat thought on the music of The Clash. Rather it is to explore the various and at times contradictory ways in which the presence of Allen Ginsberg and his wide-ranging lyrical contributions help to make 'Ghetto Defendant' the apogee of The Clash's transnationalism. This transnationalism was first hinted at on the band's cover version of Junior Murvin's 'Police and Thieves' in 1977, but it began to expand during the writing of *London Calling* (a title which in itself signals a growing need to reach out beyond the provincial for musical forms and ideas) and reached a peak on *Sandinista!* and *Combat Rock*. What Strummer and Ginsberg do in 'Ghetto Defendant' is carefully set up a dialectical argument between local and global perspectives, with the eventual aim of demonstrating their interpenetration. Keith Topping says that the song 'largely concern[s] New York's spiralling drug crisis,' and that Strummer 'used the opportunity to blame the addicts' depression for the breakdown of community street spirit' (67). Following Topping's reading, the frequently repeated chorus lines 'It's heroin pity, not tear gas nor baton charge / That stops you taking the city' would become a sneering indictment of junkie passivity. This is true only to a point, and disregards the overall trajectory of the song, which describes a gradually expanding outlook encompassing influences at civic, national and transnational level, frequently prompted by the Voice of God's spoken-word contributions.

It *is* a song about addiction, yet I aim to demonstrate how its transnational agenda reveals a whole range of addictions: to heroin, of course, but also to political power, to money, to control and to a monolithic and rigid conception of national identity. In analysing these addictions, and in working through a text which touches on Reaganite drugs policy and foreign policy, real estate developments in eighties New York and the life and work of Rimbaud, my approach is necessarily eclectic and occasionally somewhat diffuse, drawing on a wide variety of

sources (in the manner of Strummer and Ginsberg). In the end, I argue, what emerges as the song's most influential force is Rimbaud himself. Not only does a shared interest in his work unite Beats and punks,¹ but he also serves to make this much more than an anti-drugs song, or even a straightforwardly scathing attack on the Reagan-Thatcher axis whose right-wing ideologies and policies, particularly Reagan's continuation of the Nixonian 'War on Drugs' and military interventions in Latin America, provide the main backdrop to the song's narrative. This narrative starts out in realist mode as social and materialist critique, but the irruption of Rimbaud destabilises it and offers an alternative approach to the local and global problems outlined, one which has more to do with the individual imagination than with affiliations of right and left. Although the evocation of Rimbaud links together various sources and throws up some pleasing coincidences (Marseille, for instance, is both the place where he died aged 37 and, as Alfred McCoy and Alan Block state, a major centre for heroin laboratories in the early 1970s [McCoy and Block 9]), his main function, I contend, is disruption. He disrupts the song's realist narrative and its materialist critique, and ultimately disrupts the transatlantic special relationships of Reagan and Thatcher and indeed of Strummer and Ginsberg. Rimbaud's decontextualisation, and indeed the decontextualisation characteristic of his work (Noland 582) is one of the main reasons why, I argue toward the end of the article, 'Ghetto Defendant' is such a valuable document for approaching American Studies transnationally and for thinking about the notion of transnational identity itself.

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So far I have been talking about lyrical content, but even before one looks at the words, the instrumentation and musical ordonnance provide ample evidence of the song's hybridity and internationalism. At the heart of the composition is Paul Simonon's mid-tempo dub reggae bass line, by the time of *Combat Rock* a familiar signifier of Jamaican music's enduring influence on the band. The slightly eerie quality of the song derives in part from the fact that the main bass key is seldom unambiguous. In the opening bars, for example, the single E note first picked by Mick Jones on the guitar provides a clear third to accompany Simonon's root C, giving the verse the feel of C major. Elsewhere, notably in the chorus, the bass key seems to reference both C major and A minor simultaneously. The dissociative mood of the bass line is further enhanced by the arpeggiated power chord triads starting on D and E, neither major nor minor, which are doubled by Jones's staccato guitar. Along with Strummer's melody, which sits between Ionian and Aeolian modes, the

bass line is instrumental in lending the music an unresolved air appropriate to a song about insoluble issues and individuals unable to escape from destructive patterns of behaviour. By taking its inspiration from Kingston, Jamaica, it also complements the lyrical content of the song by reminding the listener that New York's drug problem cannot be separated from the U.S.'s complex political and economic relationships with its international neighbours, particularly Caribbean and Latin American countries. Jamaica, for example, is a primary source of marijuana entering the U.S., as well as a major transit point for cocaine exportation from South America and the origin of a number of drug gangs (or posses) in the U.S. (Jones 122–23). In addition, it has reportedly suffered a dramatic increase in crime as a result of the U.S. policy of mass deportation of criminals, an example of 'crime displacement' (Jones 120).

Set alongside such facts is another somewhat more benign example of U.S.-Caribbean traffic, again to be found in the instrumentation and musical styling. One of the song's recurring motifs is Mick Jones's plaintive harmonica line, immediate reference points for which are likely to be reggae albums of the seventies and early eighties such as Keith Hudson's *Torch of Freedom* (1975), Big Youth's *Progress* (1979), Black Uhuru's *Sinsemilla* (1980) and Ras Midas's *Rastaman in Exile* (1980). Such records, which were an important influence not only on The Clash's music but also on the cover art of singles like 'Complete Control' (1977) and albums like *Black Market Clash* (1980), frequently employed the harmonica to add bluesy embellishments to generic roots rhythms. (This is particularly evident on Hudson's melancholic track 'Like I'm Dying'). In so doing, they acknowledged the journey the instrument had taken from its early twentieth century role in southern U.S. 'race music' recordings and early acoustic blues (subsequently in electric Chicago blues), and then south into Jamaica where it played its part in rural mento music, as an aid to the pumping rhythm in ska and finally in rocksteady and reggae tunes. What is especially noteworthy about the migration of the harmonica, aside from the fact that the instrument was played on many of the most famous Jamaican tracks by the American Jimmy Becker, is its resultant participation in genres of music customarily associated with black identity some time after it had ceased to be solely an element of 'race music' in the States and had been appropriated by the folk tradition of Woody Guthrie and later Bob Dylan. On this song, of course, it is further modulated by The Clash's distinctively English punk-dub idiom; as Paul Simonon says, The Clash's aim since the recording of 'Police and Thieves' was to adopt reggae, 'put it on a number 31 bus and send it up to Camden' (qtd. in Topping 108). If one considers the multiple musical

and historical interactions outlined here, it is clear that Jones's harmonica line, simple and naïve-sounding though it is, performs a triangulating function which adds weight to the transnational agenda of the lyrics.

In the chorus, the contrast of the soporific harmonica line and Topper Headon's fast, insistent cowbells echoes a tension, consistently rehearsed in the lyrics, between inertia and action; between, at an individual level, junkie stupor and the urgency of the need to score. In light of the song's broader international concerns, this same tension ultimately takes on the status of paradox, culminating in the lines: 'The admiral snores command / Submarines boil in oceans / While the armies fight with suns.'² Clearly an allegory of Ronald Reagan, who by most accounts 'remained detached from most details of governing' (Schaller 56) and preferred to leave the byzantine business of policy to advisers while he concentrated on presentation, the snoring commander's very 'hands-off' approach (Johnson 50) leads directly to violent conflict. Neatly encapsulating both Reagan's quiescence and his aggressively interventionist approach in, for example, Nicaragua, these lines of the song also constitute the endpoint of the song's increasing interest in global considerations. Whereas Strummer's opening salvos focus almost exclusively on the unnamed female addict in the New York ghetto, this final verse sees him lamenting, in clichéd but nonetheless heartfelt terms, the casualties of capitalism: 'All churn in the wake / On the great ship of progress.'

At many pivotal moments in the song, it is Ginsberg's interjections in the guise of the Voice of God that provide a catalyst for the intermingling of local and global concerns. His first words, 'Starved in megalopolis / Hooked on necropolis,' not only create an atmosphere of helpless suffering, addiction and death, but also introduce the classical imagery that colours the early verses. The summoning of Athenian democratic society in the insistent rhyming words 'necropolis,' 'acropolis' and 'cosmopolis' serves ostensibly to emphasise New York's diversity and sheer massiveness, to proclaim the city's status as an object worthy of serious literary attention, and to lend Ginsberg's proclamations historical grandeur. Yet the words 'starved' and 'hooked', as well as the bleak imagery of subsequent verses, starkly indicate how divisive and undemocratic the contemporary urban space is.

From starvation, inertia and passivity the lyrics suddenly shift to imperatives of action which bring ancient and contemporary rudely into collision: 'Do the worm on acropolis / Slamdance cosmopolis / Enlighten the populace.' Inviting the listener to reclaim urban space through hip-hop and punk dances ('the worm' and 'slamdance' respectively³) is thus a call to arms against the soporific effects of smack and an attempt

to reinstate enlightenment and democracy through subcultural practices. It also initiates the global perspective of the song by implicit acknowledgment of the relations, particularly in the work of The Clash, between punk, in its early incarnations a predominantly white musical genre, and black music such as reggae, hip-hop and rap.⁴ Such a unifying impulse at a cultural level contrasts with the divisive U.S. drug policy at the time of the song which effectively accelerated ghettoisation and 'criminalized a substantial portion of the African-American population.... From the outset, the enforcement emphasis of the Reagan-Bush drug war targeted inner-city street dealing in a way that produced a disproportionate number of black arrests' (McCoy and Block 7).

From the beginning, then, Ginsberg's words suggest that this is much more than a song about a person accused of a drug-related crime. Indeed, 'Ghetto Defendant' denotes not only the anonymous female addict introduced by Strummer in the first verse, but also the city authorities' drive toward urban segregation outlined later in the song in lines such as 'walled out of the city', and a conservative artistic outlook which might resist the convening of the worm, the slamdance, Athens and Rimbaud. What is actually on trial here, therefore, is any sort of impulse toward localisation and division rooted in stereotyping and prejudice.

Strummer's first verse paints a bleak portrait of dependence, poverty and crippling deferral, summed up in the lines 'She spent a lifetime deciding / How to run from it.' For the unnamed protagonist life, brutally described as 'hungry darkness,' consists only of the thwarted desire to escape life 'in the pit.' Indeed, temporality itself seems to have dissolved in addiction, resulting in an enervating, continual present in which each fix encapsulates life as a whole and all possibility of movement is destroyed:

Once fate had a witness
And the years seemed like friends
(Girlfriends)
Her babies can dream⁵
But dreams begin like they end.

Thus each moment is effectively the end, but an end which feels, paradoxically, endlessly deferred. Trapped within her habit, the addict is unable to step outside her situation and be 'witness' to her fate; in other words, to see where her life is heading and, perhaps, change things. Clearly the ghetto babies have no future, and Strummer's verse similarly ends in a circular manner which appears to preclude the possibility of meaningful progress or historicity.

As Ginsberg's next interjection suggests, each heroin injection is a

'shot in eternity', yet these words also connote the street violence and possible police brutality revisited in the imagery of subsequent verses, as well as providing a lyrical correlative to the 'tick-tick boom' motif created by Jones's percussive guitar strokes and the accompanying reverb-saturated drum crash. In his biography of Strummer, Chris Salewicz describes the song as 'Joe's expression of a commonly voiced conspiracy theory of the time—that heroin was encouraged to flourish in the ghettos as an anaesthetic' (326), and the song does indeed raise the possibility of more systemic control and subjugation through the increased use of punning and ambiguity in lines such as 'shot in eternity' and 'methadone kitty'. Here, for example, 'kitty' refers simultaneously to a female name, a seventeenth-century term for a dissolute woman, and the supply of maintenance anti-addictive used for the treatment of heroin users. By following 'methadone kitty' with the oxymoronic 'iron serenity', Ginsberg implies that the administration of methadone, itself an addictive, is not simply a method of extreme pain relief, but also a forceful way of keeping peace in the city by maintaining the boundaries between ghetto and centre. In so doing, he opens out an historical, materialist and political perspective in pointed contrast to the addict's self-absorbed and endless present.

Strummer's preoccupations in the second verse are thus taken in a new direction, inflected with the ambiguity of the line which bookends the whole verse: 'Strung-out committee.' This phrase of course refers to the addicts of the ghetto, but also connotes the coalition of city planners and business interests whose misguided and bigoted actions precipitated the developments of New York ghettos in the sixties and seventies. Walter Thabit's meticulously researched *How East New York Became a Ghetto* details numerous examples, including the 'wave of banker / broker / speculator-inspired destruction' of housing blocks on the Upper West Side which led to a Puerto Rican exodus to East New York (36); and the influence of organisations such as the NAREB (National Association of Real Estate Boards) in ensuring that mid-century migration to the more salubrious suburbs was almost exclusively a white prerogative (37–38). Immigrants and ethnic minorities were, in the words of the song, effectively 'walled out of the city', 'clubbed down from uptown' (the verb here suggesting both exclusivity and violence) and 'run out to barrio town.' In the lines 'flipped pieces of coin' and 'grafted in a jiffy'—'graft' being slang for a bribe—there is a hint at corporate and political corruption, and at the heart of the verse we find 'the guards'. Ginsberg is most likely referring here to the police and, unexpectedly, they elicit some sympathy. 'Forced to watch at the feast', ('feast' refers to both the glut

of drug addiction and the addiction to profits garnered from real estate development) they are then asked to 'sweep up the night', to arrest users at street level, clear up the 'broken bottles' left behind and, one might insinuate, turn a blind eye to the corporate grafts changing hands all around them.

It is not difficult to imagine that 'strung-out committee' also refers to the politicians within the Reagan administration responsible for the ratcheting up of the 'War on Drugs' announced in 1982. Reagan's radio address on 2 October 1982, which took as its case study the place 'where narcotics crime was the worst: south Florida', made the emphasis of his government's drug strategy all too clear: 'As part of a coordinated plan, we beefed up the number of judges, prosecutors, and law enforcement people. We used military radar and intelligence to detect drug traffickers, which, until we changed the law, could not be done.' Aggressive, punitive and with familiar chunks of Hollywood cliché in Reagan's rhetoric—examples include his warning to the drug dealers that 'they can run but they can't hide'—the Reaganite campaign was addicted to increasing prosecution statistics more than it was interested in addressing the underlying causes of drug abuse. In Florida, the president proudly proclaims in the same radio address, 'drug-related arrests are up over 40 percent, the amount of marijuana seized is up about 80 percent, and the amount of cocaine seized has more than doubled.'

Numerous studies have demonstrated just how strung-out such an approach is, including Leif Rosenberger's *America's Drug War Debacle* and the essays collected in McCoy and Block's *War on Drugs: Studies in the Failure of U.S. Narcotics Policy*. However, Harry Levine and Craig Reinarmann provide one of the most succinct analyses of both the motivations and the failures of the war on drugs. Drawing on the results of various international commissions on drug abuse, none of which 'recommended the mass incarceration of drug users and petty dealers' and all of which advocated a more humane approach to the problem (536), Levine and Reinarmann ask why the U.S. in particular has consistently ignored the medical and sociological evidence and opted for what Reagan dubbed a 'hot pursuit' strategy (Radio Address). As well as observing that American drug policies are 'harsh, lively descendants of 19th- and early 20th-century anti-alcohol and prohibitionist campaigns' (536), the authors argue that blaming social ills on drugs has long been a convenient way to ignore underlying inequities, notably in 'housing and permanent employment' (536). Most revealing of all is their contention that 'Americans have often found a particular drug threatening because the news media and politicians linked it with an already threatening ethnic or racial minority (opium with Chinese, marijuana with Mexicans,

cocaine and heroin with African-Americans and Latin-Americans)' (536). Thus drugs policy becomes bound up with the demonisation of perceived outsiders and the bolstering of a factitious sense of native identity.

It is in this context that Reagan's claim to have 'increased efforts overseas to cut drugs off before they left other countries' borders' (Radio Address) should be assessed. Clearly, domestic drug policy and foreign policy are closely intertwined, and while space does not permit me to enter into a detailed analysis of the Reagan administration's overseas activities, covert or otherwise, it is worth drawing attention to the work of political scientists such as Peter Dale Scott, whose research strongly suggests that U.S. foreign policy has frequently worsened the domestic drug crisis rather than alleviating it. Scott argues, to cite but a couple of his examples, that Washington's alliances with corrupt right-wing forces in South America may actually have created new routes for cocaine trafficking into the U.S. (125), and that CIA collaboration with the KMT in South-East Asia did the same for heroin shipments in the seventies (126).⁶

In 'Ghetto Defendant' such extrapolations pave the way for Ginsberg's final verse:

Guatemala, Honduras, Poland
The Hundred Years War
TV rerun invasion, death squad Salvador
Afghanistan meditation, old Chinese flu
Kick junk—what else can a poor worker do?⁷

What starts as a list of global trouble spots, alluding to American intervention in Central America and, more obliquely, the Reagan administration's hardline position against Soviet military activity in Eastern Europe, proceeds via Afghanistan (a major site of opium cultivation) to a euphemistic colloquial reference to the effects of heroin—the 'old Chinese flu.' The final line returns its focus to the individual, echoing Strummer's first verse, and neatly illustrates two ideas reprised throughout the song: first, U.S. foreign policy is inseparable from U.S. drugs policy and second, the cultural and economic concerns of the everyday citizen are bound up in larger geopolitical decisions. From the first verse, in which Strummer describes the oblivion of the individual user's life, through a second verse concerned with influences at civic level, the gaze of the song has widened to a truly global level, reinforcing the view that local, domestic issues cannot be separated from global historical questions. Strummer continues to chant the chorus, but the 'heroin pity' he laments has now assumed international significance.

Twenty-eight years after the release of 'Ghetto Defendant' we have become accustomed to the term 'globalisation' as 'a socio-political and

geographical phenomenon' (Newman 2) and a critical dominant which describes, variously, the 'speeding up of interconnectedness in all aspects of contemporary social life' (Held *et al* 2); the 'intensification of worldwide social relations which link distant localities in such a way that local happenings are shaped by events occurring many miles away, and vice versa' (Giddens 64); or, more insidiously, 'empire (or capitalism) by another name' (Newman 5). Given its status as a 'travelling' concept, one which, by virtue of its inherently plural nature and its tendency to move between disciplines and do particular work in particular contexts (Bal 25), we seem on the whole inclined to accept the fuzziness of the term.

Though the particular form of 'thick description' I have adopted—performing a close reading of the song in the contexts of Reaganite drug enforcement and foreign policy, the politics of urban planning in New York and The Clash's transnational musical agenda—is perhaps as guilty of o'er leaping ambition as the song itself, it is nonetheless appropriate to such a travelling concept and, I hope, defensible for that reason. Even at the basic level of production history, a track like this commands attention as a global artefact. Here is a song recorded and mixed in New York and London by an English band and an American poet, and which appeared on an album whose cover art featured a photo of the band taken in Thailand during an international tour.⁸ These facts in themselves only get us so far, but in conjunction with the musical and lyrical travels I have already discussed, they lend weight to Judith Newman's contention that the very particularity of a global text can serve as resistance against a somewhat ironically homogenising global discourse (6). This is, of course, the rationale behind the ambitious and idiosyncratic connections Strummer and Ginsberg forge in 'Ghetto Defendant.' By making their text such a hotchpotch of particulars, they attempt to undermine a conservative position which aims to homogenise national identity by demonising the alterior, the idiosyncratic and, indeed, the resistant.

One could argue that The Clash's experimentation with reggae was not simply an attempt to bring their 'own music to the party' (Strummer, *Westway*), but also a way of disrupting the rigid link between that musical genre and the black identity politics with which it was traditionally associated. It was, in a sense, a way of recontextualising, transnationalising or globalising reggae in order to initiate white working class and black immigrant dialogue. With the help of a willing accomplice in Allen Ginsberg, The Clash attempt a similar act of disruption in 'Ghetto Defendant.' In 'The Internationalization of American Studies and the

Ideology of Exchange', Paul Giles details a methodological framework and a rationale for such transatlantic disruptions. For Giles, 'an international angle on American studies can create interference between text and context, thereby disturbing the tautological assumptions that would explain individual events through metanarratives of American consciousness' (529). Through the positive embrace of the 'friction' (Giles 527) resulting from encounters between, broadly, European cultural studies' concern with ideology, multidisciplinary and reflexivity and American Studies' traditional rhetoric of emancipation and 'self-authenticating freedom' (Giles 526), both approaches can be subjected to irony and re-evaluation. Giles cites as one example the 'negative' interpretations of Antonio Gramsci's work on cultural hegemony in the 'alien philosophical terrain of the United States': such interpretations say a lot about American culture and its significant absences (536). Conversely, he identifies in the recent work of cultural theorists such as Stuart Hall⁹ a renewed emphasis on the interaction of the local and the global, as well as an appreciation that the global strategies of fluidity and exchange associated with the United States can be extricated 'from any necessary affiliation with the ideologies of Thatcher and Reagan' (Giles 541) and might actually serve themselves to disrupt 'anachronistic social hierarchies' on this side of the Atlantic, leading to an increased capacity to accept difference (543). In other words, hackneyed American ideas of diversity and individual freedom can be reinvigorated when utilised out of context, and used deconstructively.

In light of these arguments, the particular historical moment of 'Ghetto Defendant' might appear especially significant. Written and performed in 1981, released on record in 1982, it sits squarely in the period when the right-wing Reagan-Thatcher relationship dominated Western politics and when, as a result, cultural studies as a discipline and a 'mode of resistance' began significantly to expand, notably at the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies in Birmingham (Giles 531). Strummer and Ginsberg's transnationalism must have seemed especially urgent at a time when the American president tended to shy away from complex policy pronouncements and rely on winks, jokes and the 'evocation of simple patriotic themes' to promote a sense of unity and exceptionalism (Schaller 53). This was a president, it should be remembered, who made no major foreign policy speech until 15 October, 1981, some ten months after his inauguration (Stuckey 38), and who returned again and again in his speeches to the image of the American hero and his or her 'capacity to perform great deeds' (Reagan, Inaugural).

As Mary Stuckey suggests (37), Reagan's underlying point in these

speeches was that simply to be part of ‘this breed called Americans’ (Reagan, Inaugural) was to be a hero. Moreover, for all his talk of diversity in the American population, Reagan’s multiculturalism tended to be vague and gestural, ‘predicated upon the kind of identity politics...bound up with old transcendental imperatives asserting some self-defining freedom of the human spirit’ (Giles 530); rooted in a ‘sovereignty...not for sale’; and defined in opposition to ‘enemies of freedom’ (Reagan, Inaugural). What Reagan frequently achieved through his rhetoric was a closing of ranks even as he appeared to be embracing international relations. To paraphrase Arif Dirlik, he might have been content to bring the world to America in tired metaphors of the melting pot, but was far less inclined to bring America to the world (288), to acknowledge that it was but one part of a global system of diaspora and cultural exchange. Immigrants were still expected magically to transform into ‘Americans’ rather than maintaining what Robert A. Gross calls ‘a cosmopolitan consciousness’ (378).

Paul Giles’s ideas are useful in analysing the kinds of disruptions achieved by Strummer and Ginsberg’s dialectic in ‘Ghetto Defendant’, the ways in which they try to bring the world to America and America to the world. That they frequently ironise and contradict even their own positions only serves to emphasise the important destabilising qualities of a transnational approach. So if Strummer’s romantic commitment to community as a cohesive force (in the British tradition of Raymond Williams, perhaps) and his ‘lunatic Stalinist’ adherence to discipline and group solidarity (Strummer, *Westway*) put pressure on what he perceives as Reaganite economic individualism, they are in turn put under pressure by Ginsberg’s dedication to mobility, his far-reaching cultural references and his obvious admiration for the decadence of Rimbaud. Likewise, the very presence of Rimbaud—someone whose own commitment to individualistic creative expression involved the regular use of opiates, Absinthe and other disruptive substances, yet whose anti-bourgeois sentiments may have inspired his brief participation in the Paris Commune in 1871—calls into question the efficacy of an unyielding anti-drugs position.¹⁰

Rimbaud’s sudden emergence in Strummer’s unaccompanied words at the start of the third verse constitutes the most compellingly disruptive narrative of the song. In fact, I would argue, it forces one to reappraise the entire track. Despite the biographical references to the Paris Commune, to his possible expulsion from Belgium after the trial of Paul Verlaine in the line ‘bounced out of the room,’¹¹ and to his early death, this is much more than a simple act of memorialisation or even reverence.

It is, in effect, a deliberate attempt at ‘disturbing the tomb’, a refusal to let the poet remain ‘shut up in eternity’, a means of reinvigorating his legacy by radically recontextualising him within a song ostensibly about American Empire. In so doing, it disrupts and offers an alternative to the realist critique I have spent time unpacking, without in any way rejecting a transnational perspective. What it offers is an alternative version of transnationalism.

Rimbaud’s is a European, decadent, symbolist vision of direct and untrammelled sensation achieved through deviation from social, cultural and poetic norms; it is avowedly anti-rationalist and advocates a view of the world as imaginatively transfigured. To achieve this transfiguration the artist must aspire to oblivion through destruction of ego and ‘everything that builds up human personality’ (Starkie 122), as well as a radical simplification and reconfiguration of language that it might express the ineffable and achieve access to primitive illumination (Starkie 125).

Though his poetry is far from lacking a political edge—C. A. Hackett, for example, makes clear how in both his early poems and more obliquely in later works such as *Illuminations* Rimbaud’s ire is directed at bourgeois complacency (9, 51)—Rimbaud’s vision is nonetheless non-materialist and antithetical to the common sense philosophy so influential on Thomas Paine, the Declaration of Independence and American ideas of democracy and manifest destiny. What it proposes is neither self-evident equality nor an ideal of individual transcendence of reality, but an individual consciousness that refuses to dissolve into familiar ‘reality’ at all. Allowing Rimbaud’s ‘words like flamethrowers’ into this song challenges not only a Reaganite ethos of everyday heroic deeds, it even manages to problematise Ginsberg’s documentary recitation of international trouble spots. Ginsberg’s specificity—‘Guatemala, Honduras, Poland’—has to be set against the indeterminate *anti-paysage* that characterised the *Illuminations*, landscapes and cityscapes in which ‘external reference’ is irrelevant because the features constantly metamorphose (Perloff 45) so that ‘the sense of place becomes more and more elusive’ (Perloff 51). For Rimbaud to burn ‘the ghettos in their chests’ is thus for the ghetto to become something internalised, psychological, untethered from specific urban spaces (like the New York of the opening verses) or nation states.

As Strummer’s lyrics on *Combat Rock* become more overtly political yet simultaneously more lyrical (and at times plain obscure), there is an observable tendency to temper specific geographical references with a distinctly Rimbauldian sense of decontextualisation and liminality.

'Straight to Hell', for example, is a song which deals with the plight of Vietnamese boat people and refers directly to Ho Chi Minh City, yet also expresses a personal sense of rootlessness: 'It could be anywhere / Most likely could be any frontier, any hemisphere / No man's land.' Strummer's words encapsulate the predicament of migrants and portray the contemporary 'global soul', the inhabitant of the 'Deracination-state' with 'a porous sense of self,' (Iyer 19, 18), but they also pave the way for a kind of imaginative mobile transnationalism inherited in part from Rimbaud. Part of the poet's subcultural appeal to Beats and punks is his decontextualising impulses and the ways in which his work 'challenges the principle of unity and cohesion,' the ideological processes of 'normalisation' in everyday life (Hebdige 18). It is precisely this breaking free of context both by and of Rimbaud within 'Ghetto Defendant' that enables an alternative, albeit idealised, kind of movement beyond national boundaries.

Rimbaud's presence makes it unclear whether one is to view the song as jeremiad, political polemic or as argument for liberation through the individual creative act or spirituality. Is the correct response to the global problems the song has worked so hard to make us aware of to be found in materialist critique, in imaginative deformation or in a total jettisoning of materiality? Ginsberg's very last contribution is to chant 'Gateh Gateh Pare Sam Gateh Bodhi Svaha' over the fade-out.¹² With an internal tension typical of the song as a whole, a final critique of materialist concerns is expressed in the philosophy of the non-material. So despite all that he has said before, Ginsberg's final words are not concerned with the politics of left and right or with national conflicts, but with the potential for the individual consciousness to be linked with others through a radical cognitive, imaginative and spiritual remapping of life and the world. Yet Strummer continues to sing the chorus, so that the two apparently contradictory approaches, the material and non-material, continue to cross-fertilise until the final bar.

Oscillating wildly between ideas, characters and locations, the lyrics of 'Ghetto Defendant' use their disparate elements to dramatise both the problems and the potentialities of a transnational outlook. Such an outlook is problematic in that it can all too readily deteriorate into rootlessness, confusion, incoherence; yet it is the very refusal to cohere in familiar, monolithic realities that makes such an outlook potentially liberating and resistant to dominant nationalist discourses. To dramatise these issues in the form of a song, as this essay has earlier suggested, is highly appropriate. (One might, in fact, suggest that Rimbaud's words and Ginsberg's chant aspire, in Pateresque fashion, to the condition of

music.) Music is directly and powerfully affective, yet cognitively elusive and somewhat resistant to analysis by virtue of its inherently abstract and symbolic qualities.¹³ As Nicholas Cook observes, ‘there is always a disparity between the experience of music and the way in which we imagine or think about it’ (135). To analyse the compositional and structural elements of a piece of music, as I have attempted to do, does not of course preclude one from engaging emotionally with it, a point made eloquently by R. A. Sharpe (15), but the pleasure it is possible to derive from some level of intellectual understanding is surely not the same as the immediate visceral pleasure one might experience on hearing the piece for the first time.

My point here is twofold. First, Ginsberg’s recourse to chanting at the close of the track represents a recognition that words, no matter how wide the frames of reference, are in themselves inadequate to the task in hand—which is the simultaneous expression of a materialist critique of political realities and of spiritual sensation. Music better captures the transnational self’s fluidity, its elusiveness, its hybridity by virtue of the fact that it, like the ‘transnational’ or ‘global’ as ideas, is not simply a question of analysable elements within geopolitical structures but also a question of personal *feeling*. Secondly, let us not forget that sound is, in essence, *travelling waves* and thus perhaps the most travelling of concepts: whether in Mick Jones’s harmonica or in Paul Simonon’s bass line, its own movements can illuminate, ironise and disrupt in subtle ways because it slips across borders with such ease and rarely can be said to come from one place alone.

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APPENDIX – ‘GHETTO DEFENDANT’ LYRICS

(*Rat Patrol from Fort Bragg* version). Allen Ginsberg lyrics in italics.

Starved in megalopolis
 Hooked on necropolis
Addict of metropolis
Do the worm on acropolis
Slamdance cosmopolis
Enlighten the populace

Hungry darkness of living
 Who will thirst in the pit?
Hooked in necropolis
 She spend a lifetime deciding
 How to run from it

Once fate had a witness
And the years seemed like friends

Girlfriends

Now her babies can dream
But dreams begin like they end

Shot into eternity

Methadone kitty

Iron serenity

Ghetto defendant

It is heroin pity

Not tear gas nor baton charge

That stops you taking the city

Strung out committee

Walled out of the city

Clubbed down from uptown

Sprayed pest from the next

Run out to barrio town

The guards are itchy

Forced to watch at the feast

Then sweep up the night

Flipped pieces of coin

Broken bottles

Exchanged for birthright

Grafted in a jiffy

Strung out committee

Sitting pretty

Grafted in a jiffy

The ghetto prince of gutter poets

Was bounced out of the room

Jean Arthur Rimbaud

By the bodyguards of greed

For disturbing the tomb

1873

His words like flamethrowers

Paris Commune

Burnt the ghettos in their chests

His face painted whiter

And he was laid to rest

Dies in Marseille

Buried in Charleville

Shut up in eternity

Soap floods oil and water

All churn in the wake

Ocean of time

On the great ship of progress

The crew can't find the brake

Anchor drag

Klaxons are blaring

The admiral snores command

And dreams

Submarines boil in oceans

While the armies fight with suns

Iron serenity

Shut up in eternity

Strung out committee

Senator witty

The guards are itchy

Guatemala, Honduras, Poland

The Hundred Years War

TV re-run invasion

Death squad Salvador

Afghanistan meditation

Old Chinese flu

Kick junk— what else can a poor worker do?

NOTES

1. Carrie Jaurès Noland explores in detail the uses to which Patti Smith, in particular, puts the texts of Rimbaud in her attempt to create the genre of 'rock poetry.' She is astute in observing that Smith is familiar both with the specifics of Rimbaud's work and with 'the Rimbaud myth—the poet as rebel almost without historical specificity' (595). This tendency to be roughly mythologised is another point of connection between Rimbaud and the Beats, I would suggest. Although Noland stresses the avant-garde, literary influences on punk (584), she makes no mention of The Clash's evocation of Rimbaud.
2. These lyrics do not, in fact, feature on the version of 'Ghetto Defendant' which appears on *Combat Rock* and was produced by Glyn Johns. They are part of a longer version of the song, mixed by Mick Jones, which was intended for inclusion on the double album *Rat Patrol from Fort Bragg*. After squabbling between the band members, this longer project was scrapped, production duties were handed over to Johns and *Combat Rock* was the result. However, the six-minute version of 'Ghetto Defendant,' including these lines, was often played live by The Clash. For the purposes of this article, I use the lyrics from *Rat Patrol*, but note any significant differences be-

tween it and the *Combat Rock* version. The 'suns' probably refers to nuclear weapons, with Strummer employing the same metaphor as Simon and Garfunkel's 1964 song 'The Sun is Burning'.

3. Ginsberg apparently had to ask Strummer for the names of these dances (Salewicz 327).
4. Keith Topping rightly makes much of early English punk's embrace of reggae as 'the only like-minded anti-establishment music around in 1976 for punks to listen to.' Punks realised that 'white working-class youths like themselves were just as alienated, because of the class system, as the children of Caribbean immigrants' (23). Dick Hebdige also acknowledges these connections (40–70). When The Clash spent time in New York in the late seventies and early eighties, it was Mick Jones in particular who became entranced with hip-hop.
5. On *Combat Rock* this line is changed to 'Now her doll has a dream'. 'Doll' still refers to the child, but also puns on the slang name of various drugs, including amphetamines, MDMA and, most likely in this context, depressants or downers. 'Girlfriends' is a rather obscure reference, evidence, perhaps, of the lyric sensibility inherited from Rimbaud.
6. Robert A. Pastor's assessment is somewhat different. He says that Washington's spiralling debt during the Reagan years resulted in the deployment of fewer military advisors in the Andean region, thereby reducing the pressure on traffickers to the U.S. (44).
7. The reference to the Hundred Years War is also somewhat opaque. In conjunction with the countries listed in the previous line, it makes the simple point that such conflicts are ongoing, that the whole of the twentieth century has indeed been defined by conflict. The Hundred Years War was significant in being the first major war in which peasants played a more important role in the fighting than nobility on horseback. Standing armies predominated, and this was one of the factors leading to the change from a medieval feudal system to a more centralised nation-state. Moreover, it was a war (or, more accurately, a series of wars), specifically concerned with national identity, and which ultimately led to England's relative isolation as an island nation. Its inclusion in 'Ghetto Defendant', then, is consistent with Strummer and Ginsberg's preoccupations with the individual, the nation, and transnational negotiations.
8. According to photographer Pennie Smith, it was during this photo shoot that all pretence of coherence within the band disappeared: 'When I saw it all break down was round the time of the shoot in Thailand. It literally somehow dissolved before my eyes. There was no longer the same clump of people I knew in front of me' (qtd. in Salewicz 338). Clearly, Topper Headon's heroin addiction was a major factor, but there is also the suggestion that the global demands of the Clash brand took their toll on the members of the band.
9. One example would be Hall's 1997 essay 'The Local and the Global: Globalization and Ethnicity'.
10. It is also worth mentioning drummer Topper Headon's own addiction to heroin at the time of the song, which culminated in his sacking from the band in London in May 1982, just before an extensive American tour. In the documentary *Westway to the World*, Strummer implies that it is not heroin addiction per se with which he has a problem, only the unsuitability of the drug to drumming. It is, he says, more sympathetic to sax playing, where one can 'sort of float over the music.'
11. Jean Bourguignon and Charles Houin offer this view (93); Graham Robb disputes it

- (225). The precise meaning of the line 'for disturbing the tomb' remains opaque, but could refer euphemistically to the sexual practices which became an unfortunate and irrelevant point of fascination during the investigation of the Verlaine shooting on 10 July 1873.
12. 'Gone, Gone, Gone beyond / Gone utterly beyond.' The Buddhist chant describes the abandoning of physical form.
 13. I do not have the space here fully to justify my assertion that music is a 'symbolic' form, in the sense that it has a dynamic structure that 'can express the forms of vital experience which language is peculiarly unfit to convey' (Langer 32). I would guide the reader towards the many fascinating books by scholars much more qualified than I to cover the subject, including Langer's *Feeling and Form: a Theory of Art*, Alan P. Merriam's *The Anthropology of Music* and, more recently, Nicholas Cook's *Music, Imagination and Culture* and R. A. Sharpe's *Music and Humanism: an Essay in the Aesthetics of Music*.

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