Youth Culture, Diasporic Aesthetics, and the Art of Being Seen in the Bahamas

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> Blackness would come to rest in the eyes; blackness a way of seeing and being seen.
>
> John Edgar Wideman, *Sent for You Yesterday* (1983)

In the summer of 2004, a young girl emerged from her limousine amid a hail of blinding flashes. Stepping onto the red carpet in front of a grand hotel, she raised her gown ever so slightly so that it would swirl gracefully around her like a satin cloud. As she strode forward, a sea of photographers parted. Their shutters snapped at her heels, creating a barrage of light and sound. Suddenly, a young man pushed through the army of photographers and lunged at the young starlet. As she attempted to fend off her assailant, the roar of a motorcycle engine interrupted the scene. Its rider, in a few swift moves, tossed the offender aside. He then extended his arm to the young damsel and they walked into the hotel together under a bright canopy of camera flashes.

Although reminiscent of celebrities' red carpet arrivals at the Oscars or the choreographed theatrics of a music video, this dazzling entrance took place far from the bright lights of Hollywood. It occurred at a high school prom in Nassau, Bahamas. In years past, students in the island nation attended their prom without fanfare. Since the late 1990s, however, high school and even preschool proms have become theatrical happenings. Prom-goers stage grand entrances, arriving proceeded by motorcycle motorcades or helicoptered into the prom venue from on high, often at great expense.[1] An entourage of attendants, trumpeters, dancers, or photographers frequently accompanies the extravagantly attired high-school prom attendees, who are typically seventeen or eighteen years old. The entrance is not simply the dramatic staging of one's arrival, but also involves a pageant-like parade down a red carpet before entering the hotel. Inside, the prom-goers join their peers and sometimes watch the remaining arrivals on widescreen televisions, eventually bestowing the title of "best entrance." Clearly, the entrance is in fact the prom's main event.

These glittery cultural manifestations invite a number of questions. What factors account for the recent popularity and pageantry of the proms in the Bahamas, especially "the entrance"? What visual cultural models affect the visual scripts, the fantastical narratives, in which prom-goers insert themselves? What social, political, aesthetic, and historical conditions inform the spectacularization of the proms? What might their recent theatricalization reveal about structures of visibility and invisibility in postcolonial Bahamian society more broadly?

While local and global influences, from celebrity culture in America to masquerade traditions in the Bahamas,[2] inform the pomp and pageantry of the proms, one cultural source is most audible and visible at the event: black American hip-hop culture. Not only does hip-hop provide the literal soundtrack for many of the entrances—with hip-hop music being boomed from car sound systems—but its visual cultural expressions are especially pronounced, as prom-goers emulate the displays of materialism and conspicuous consumption found in some late twentieth-century expressions of the genre. Young male prom-goers don fashions made popular by hip-hop stars, stepping out, as one local newspaper put it, "in pimp daddy suits looking richer than these rappers" (Stack 2006:B1). Prom participants arrive in luxury automobiles, stretch Hummers, or rides that have been "pimped out" with butterfly doors and shiny rims, all popular vehicles of visibility and prestige in hip-hop. As young people in the independent nation consciously draw on the cultural expres-

1 Pen and Pixel Graphics
B.G.: Chopper City in the Ghetto (1999)
Cover art, Cash Money Records, New Orleans.
Photo: Reproduced with permission of Universal Music Enterprises
B.G.'s cover epitomizes hip-hop's aesthetic of conspicuous consumption as well as its emphasis on commodities that bling, shine, or reflect light. The rapper coined the term "bling," which he described as "the sound light makes when it hits a diamond."

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sions of their African American neighbors to the north, the entrances also provide points of departure for considering contemporary types of African diasporic formation, and specifically the visual ways that people of African descent across national boundaries gain knowledge of and express affiliation with other diasporic groups.

The proms have also become flash points of anti-African American sentiment. Indeed, government officials have sought to discourage the more spectacular manifestations of the proms, urging parents to practice "prom temperance," in part because many prom-goers appear to emulate displays of materialism and conspicuous consumption common in contemporary expressions of hip-hop (Kongwa 2004:A1). From the press to the pulpit, critics lambaste the extravagance of the affairs, accusing the students (and their parents)—many of whom (but not all) attend the free public school system and come from the more economically disadvantaged classes in the island—of emphasizing spectacle rather than scholarly substance. Many blame African American hip-hop culture for the focus on materialism among youth in the proms and more generally.[3] The entrances, and the controversy surrounding them, explicitly illuminate how visual forms from parts of the African diaspora can challenge, circumvent, and newly configure postcolonial formations of nation, culture, art, morality, and blackness. More specifically, the proms reveal how visual expressions of hip-hop offer Bahamian youth a model of visibility, a spectacular way of being seen that dramatizes their invisibility within local hierarchies of prestige.

In this essay, I will contextualize the proms in relationship to other visual practices in postcolonial Africa and in former British colonies. The staging of the photographic moment in some of the entrances will be considered in light of the work of Olu Oguibe (1996) and Christopher Pinney (2003), who have explored postcolonial representational models in parts of Africa and India respectively, particularly through photography. I also draw on film historian Manthia Diawara's analysis of how youth in independence-era Bamako inspired by African diasporic aesthetics (particularly those from black America) inhabited photography in more theatrical, almost cinematic, ways (2005:254). In light of these theoretical perspectives on postcolonial picturing and performance practices, I posit that the proms may also be demonstrative of young Bahamians' search for a new means of self representation, one that draws on representational vocabularies from the African diaspora, especially from black America. The proms, unlike Oguibe's and Pinney's examples, which the scholars view as a response to colonial forms of image-making, are not so much anti-colonial as they are postnational, a rejection of national expressions of visibility, culture, and blackness.

2 Preschool Prom, Yellow Elder, Nassau, Bahamas, 2006.
The words "Shinnin', Shimmer, and Splendour," which appeared on the lead float of the prom, illustrate how young people interpret and reproduce hip-hop's aesthetic of shine in the Bahamas.

PERFORMING VISIBILITY AND THE VISUAL PRACTICES OF DIASPORA

The prom entrances underscore the intrinsic importance of visual modes of representation in contemporary formations of the African diaspora. The performances, forged at the intersections of different African diasporic visual cultures, introduce a new dimension to the literature on the African diaspora. Typically this scholarship calls attention to the role that music has played in the creation and creative reinvention of African diasporic cultures at different historical moments. Paul Gilroy (1993a), Fred Moten (2003), Penny Von Eschen (2004), and Alexander Weheliye (2005), for instance, have all emphasized the centrality of music or sound within diasporic formation. Whether it is African and black British youth tuning into African American soul music or Afro-Germans plugging into a "sonic afro-modernity," scholars have explored how music and sound are intrinsic to African diasporic communication and culture. What happens to processes of African diasporic formation when musical expressions circulate through visual forms? When the image becomes intrinsic to processes of diasporic translation, how are "practices of diaspora" transformed (Edwards 2003)?

A recent act of censorship in the Bahamas supports the idea that visual forms of expression are the primary vehicles of communication between groups in the African diaspora. In 2004, the local cable company removed the Black Entertainment Television (BET) network—an American channel targeting African American audiences—from its basic cable offerings. They did so under pressure from the Bahamas Christian Council, a powerful council of religious leaders, and another group calling itself Members of the Radio Cabinet. The latter organization maintained that the content of the channel, which primarily plays R&B and hip-hop music videos, was "not in keeping with the mores of The Bahamas … Our children's development," they feared, was being "[put] at risk by exposure to some of the events of BET" ("BET slot taken" 2004). The censors specifically targeted the "video portion" of BET as the source of social contagion or corruption of the nation's youth. This singling out of black American music video programming, without any corresponding effort to ban the broadcast of hip-hop on radio or its availability in record stores, suggests that authorities perceived something that many scholars have not—that young people consume hip-hop not lyrically but visually, or through a powerful combination of the visual and the auditory. The censors recog-

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nized the primacy of the visual in contemporary formations of the African diaspora.

While this essay stresses that visual expressions, such as music videos, popular magazines, and CD covers, are the primary means through which contemporary African diasporic expressions circulate, I go further than making the case that "the master signifiers of black creativity, sound, and hearing have been supplanted by eyes and visuality," as Paul Gilroy acknowledges (1995:29). These new visual mediums have transformed the very process and production of African diasporic cultures. While, historically, visual cultural expressions like fashion or "black ephemera" have long circulated among diasporic groups (Gilroy 1993b; McAlister 2002; Edwards 2003; Thomas 2004, 2007; Chude-Sokei 2006; Neptune 2007; Thompson 2008), this most recent visual transmission of African diasporic cultures has generated a distinct mode of cultural translation: Ways of seeing and approaches to being seen are intrinsic to African diasporic formation. African diasporic subjects, especially young people, not only experience these forms visually but express their sense of connection to other African diasporic groups and their own subjectivities through visual means. In a manner recalling Joseph Roach's provocative study of how groups throughout the "circum-Atlantic world" express connections between themselves and the past through performance acts (1996), African diasporic youth cultures engage in shared performances of visibility, practices that are about staging being seen and, more specifically, being seen in the process of being seen or represented. Performance acts that capture the optical effect of being represented, the moment of being photographed, are part and parcel of this contemporary visual language of the African diaspora.

These approaches to visibility are encapsulated in the paparazzi entrance already described. The young woman who staged her appearance on the red carpet, flanked by photographers and crazed fans, did so primarily to create a spectacle of being photographed. She aimed to be seen being the subject of the photographers' flashing lights, the enviable focus of their snapping shutters, the prestigious occupant of a space where images are made and stars are illuminated. Remarkably, given that she enlisted professional photographers and photojournalists on the island to line her red carpet, material documents of the event—the actual photos—were beside the point. When asked for photographs of the red carpet entrance she replied that she had none and was ambivalent about whether any photographs had been taken.[4] Rather, the young woman choreographed the entrance to *be seen being represented.* The re-creation of being photographed was its own representational end. Many other prom participants, with or without paparazzi, express the same apparent indifference to capturing their spectacular entrances through actual photographs or video. A prom-goer who staged a grand entrance which included fifteen outriders, for instance, similarly did not have or desire photographic images of his entrance.[5] Such performances of visibility without material visual representations suggest that while the prom-goers are clearly tuned into the cult of celebrity in America's mainstream media, they approach image-making differently. Their desire to produce the effect of being represented yet lack of interest in images of the entrances—in having paparazzi who take no pictures—is reflective of more widespread approaches to visuality among black youth cultures, particularly among young persons tuned into the visual frequencies of hip-hop. The logic of the visual in hip-hop and African diasporic youth cultures more generally informs this interest in the visual effect of being photographed as its own form of representation.

BLING AND THE ART OF CONSPICUOUS CONSUMPTION

The form and content of the prom entrances take many of their cues from contemporary hip-hop, specifically visual manifestations of the forty-year-old genre popularized since the late 1990s. Many rappers, particularly those who have gained unprecedented global visibility in the last decade, have fashioned their personas and prestige through the tropes of conspicuous consumption. Although celebrations of materialism existed in the earliest forms of rap, since the late 1980s hip-hop artists have staged ostentatious displays of wealth, donning flashy jewelry, boasting about their brand-name possessions, and touting their luxury and designer goods. Such spectacular performances included P. Diddy's famed red carpet entrances by yacht or helicopter, the pimp stylings of bejeweled and chinchilla-wearing rappers like Snoop Dogg, and gold jewelry and grills in the self-stylings of southern rappers, such as the Cash Money Millionaires. Some critics and scholars bemoan these recent materialist, individualistic, and even hedonist manifestations of rap, which seem far from the politics and poetics of the earliest forms of hip-hop in the 1970s and early 1980s, when rap groups like Public Enemy drew critical attention to capitalism and its effects on the social and political conditions of African American, Afro-Caribbean, and Latino communities in postindustrial America (Gilroy 2000, Kelley 1994, West 1988). Historian Davarian Baldwin and others, however, make the point that "these artists [who celebrate materialism] have begun to discover that a black politics can also be organized within the processes of consumption" (2004; see also Kelley 1997, Rose 1994). While materialism in hip-hop has a long, complex, and still-evolving political history, these more recent manifestations of conspicuous consumption may be different from earlier expressions in that they do not simply convey excessive wealth but constitute an optics. By this I mean that rappers, through lyrical, performative, and visual means, have formulated a distinct visual language that frames how they and their possessions should be seen and how particular visual qualities of these commodities represent prestige. Often, the optical effect of light—the felt physiological sensation of light—is intrinsic to the visual production of status. This way of creating status visually informs the practices and politics of African diasporic culture in the Bahamas.

One way of teasing out this phenomenon historically is to consider the etymology of a term that best encapsulates the art of conspicuous consumption and its ways of seeing in hip-hop culture: bling. Coined in 1998 by the rapper B.G. (Baby Gangsta) of the New Orleans-based group Cash Money Millionaires, the term "bling" originally referred to expensive jewelry. B.G. further popularized and pluralized the word the following year in the track "Bling, Bling" on his *Chopper City in the Ghetto* release. "Bling" quickly entered common parlance and by 2003, the *Oxford Dictionary of the English Language* defined it not only as a "piece of ostentatious jewelry," but as any "flashy" accou-

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3 Preschool Prom, Yellow Elder, Nassau, Bahamas, 2006.
A young participant in the preschool float demonstrates how hip hop styles and its culture of consumption informs youth culture in the island.

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trement that "glorifies conspicuous consumption." The cover of *Chopper City in the Ghetto*, designed by the firm Pen and Pixel Graphics Inc., represents bling in this broader sense, portraying a visual pastiche of prized commodities. The rapper, wearing a gold chain and diamond pendant and framed by his diamond-encrusted name, sits in a phantasmagoric lair of luxury goods (Fig. 1). He appears larger than life, surrounded by a sparkling luxury automobile, a bottle of champagne, a chandelier, and a chalice or "pimp cup." A heavy, ornate gold frame containing an image of B.G. occupies a prominent place among the other signs of wealth. The designers' representation of B.G, occupying the literal and figurative frame of representation, foregrounds in part how being seen to be represented offers value within the visual economy of contemporary hip-hop.

Bling, however, refers to more than conspicuous consumption or one's self-aggrandizing portrayal as a work of art; it describes a specific visual effect. Indeed, B.G. coined the term to characterize "the imaginary sound that light makes when it hits a diamond" (quoted in Sanneh 2005). According to the rapper, bling calls attention to the moment when the commodity displays its opulence in the visual field, when light hits a luminous surface. It captures the moment, so central in contemporary hip-hop, when consumption becomes conspicuous. In other words, bling is about more than looking wealthy; it characterizes the production of its visual effects on the viewer. In this way bling can be distinguished from other forms of "conspicuous consumption" as defined by Thorstein Veblen, who first used the term (1931). Public displays of wealth evident in hip-hop do evince "pecuniary emulation," to use Veblen's characterization, when persons who are members of the working classes consume conspicuously so that they appear of higher social standing. However, the expense or accumulation of luxurious goods in hip-hop culture is directly related to the specific visual qualities of these possessions, which must shine, floss, or bling in order to convey prestige. In this instance commodities accrue worth not only for their exchange-value, as Karl Marx recognized and critiqued, but their visual production (1990).

Even as bling signifies shining visibility, the concept also evokes invisibility. The instant that reflected light bounces off of a shiny object it denies and obliterates vision. Light saturates the visual plane, ultimately blinding the viewer. Indeed, rappers often boast of bling's blinding power.[6] Bling, then, describes a mediatory point between visual surplus and disappearance, between hypervisibility and blinding invisibility; it characterizes

4 Preschool Prom, Yellow Elder, Nassau, Bahamas, 2006.

the physiological sensation of seeing when the object disappears from view. Bling, in short, illuminates an approach to visibility in which optical and even blinding visual effect has its own representational value and associated social status.

While bling pervades the lyrics, album covers, and print advertising of late twentieth-century forms of hip-hop, it perhaps most explicitly took visual form in music videos.[7] Hip-hop came of age in the era of music television, which played no small part in giving rap visibility in mainstream America and globally. Cultural historians often credit the influential director Harold "Hype" Williams with creating a particular look to hip-hop music videos, precisely by using the aesthetics of money, flash, and shine. Starting in the late 1980s, Williams began to direct videos that used light as a central subject and form, and his visual brand was to define hip-hop for more than a decade. The cinematographer-turned-director often focused on shiny objects—on the glossy curves of luxury automobiles, the sparkle of jewelry, or the shimmering surface of black female skin. But, more pertinently, he used light as an intrinsic part of the cinemagraphic production of his videos. As film theorist Roger Beebe points out, Williams often saturated the video frame with light, highlighting "luminous objects in the frame (neon, incandescent, and fluorescent bulbs)," and "highly reflective (metallic or wet surfaces)" (2007:316). Williams's use of a distinctive extreme-wide-angled lens, moreover, in some cases created the impression that the entire video was in fact a reflection on a shiny surface. It is precisely the optics of shine, so epitomized in and conveyed through music videos, which informs the aesthetics of hip-hop in the Bahamas.

SHINNIN' AND THE PRACTICE OF DIASPORA IN THE BAHAMAS

Despite some local groups' efforts in the Bahamas to unplug hip-hop, many young people in Nassau tune into rap, especially visual expressions of the genre beamed in music videos, presented in the glossy pages of American magazines like *Vibe* or the *Source,* or represented in the entertainment sections of local papers like *The Punch* or the *Confidential Source*. Young prom-goers specifically identify hip-hop music videos, freely available on the Internet and other music channels, as favored and influential forms of popular culture.[8] Prom participants on occasion will even play music videos inside their vehicles during their entrances, using the source of their imaginings and ideals about black America as the literal and figurative backdrop of their performances. At the C.R. Walker High School prom in 2006, for example, the video

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5 High School Prom, the British Colonial Hilton Hotel, Nassau, Bahamas, 2006. Since the late 1990s, high school prom entrances in the Bahamas have become theatrical happenings. Here, at the 2006 C.R. Walker high school prom, a stunningly bright green car "tricked out" with spinning rims and gift-wrapped in red ribbons makes its grand entrance.

for Lil' Wayne, a rapper from New Orleans (originally partnered with B.G. of the Cash Money Millionaires), played on the multiple television screens of an Excursion (a stretch Hummer) as students made their grand entrance. Many of the participants also incorporate objects that sparkle in hip-hop videos—from shiny cars to (cider-filled) champagne bottles—as props in their performance repertoires. What is most pertinent here, however, is not simply that youth see and emulate hip-hop music videos, but that these forms translate approaches to visibility, namely the effaciousness of the effect of light and the prestige of the frame of representation.

While the prom entrances are certainly about showing one's status through fashion, fancy cars, and outré displays of conspicuous consumption found in the rap industry, the performances demonstrate that many prom-goers convey or enhance their distinction by affecting bling's spectacular effects. A banner that appeared at a preschoolers' prom in Nassau brilliantly reflects how prom-goers speak to and through hip-hop's visual aesthetics and also illuminates how the culture of proms and hip-hop pervades among even the youngest segment of Bahamian society. The preschool banner read, "Shinnin', Shimmer, and Splendour," in gigantic glittered cardboard letters (Fig. 2). The words appeared on the lead float of a motorcade that moved slowly and noisily, blaring hip-hop, through the streets of Nassau one bright June afternoon in 2006. The motorcade, with its sparkling banner, served as a precursor to and more visible extension of the prom entrances. The words emblazoned on the banner, I would maintain, literally spell out the broader purpose of the entrances or what the young prom-goers and their parents aim to effect. The children and their teenage counterparts participated in the entrances, dressed like "pimps," as one mother described her preschooler's attire[9] or appeared in shiny automobiles, with the intent of producing bling's shine (Figs. 3–4). Indeed, it is possible that the abbreviated slang in the banner, "shinnin,'" aimed to represent both hip-hop's spoken and its visual vernacular. The banner's pronouncement and the medium of its message, involving glitter and a shiny cardboard surface, suggest that prom-goers and organizers were schooled not only in which objects garner prestige in hip-hop, but also in how the shimmering effects of light convey splendor.

Although prom-goers and their parents may spend hundreds or even thousands of dollars on the entrances and months if not years planning the occasion, some of them achieve bling's optical effects through creative and not necessarily costly means. Dressing choices, for instance, may be tailored to shine at prom. Local dress and fabric stores highlight these aesthetic preferences when the materials they advertise for the occasion are "beaded sequined fabrics," "iridescent taffeta," or "lamour" ("Prom 2004" 2004:3). Young women wear a "tiara and rhinestones or glitter," as one hair stylist observed, or, less commonly, braid flashing lights into their swept-up 'dos (Forbes 2005:B12). One dress store specifically advertised its glittery offerings as "paparazzi-approved" ("Exclusive Collections" 2006:B12).

Prom-goers' dramatic production of shine is not limited to personal appearance, but extends to the entire mise-en-scène of their performances as well. At the 2006 C.R. Walker High School prom, for instance, one young couple heralded their entrance with the use of dry ice, which their car's headlights dramatically pierced. Another couple arrived in a stunningly bright green car "tricked out" with spinning rims and gift-wrapped in red ribbons, with its butterfly doors upraised like a futuristic bird (Fig. 5). The car's elaborate sound system, on full display on its open doors, not only filled the space with a sonic vibration that spectators could feel, but put sound—and its means of production—on view. The couple that emerged from the car made an equally loud statement

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6 High School Prom, the British Colonial Hilton Hotel, Nassau, Bahamas, 2006. Young couple at the C.R. Walker prom displaying the various African diasporic styles, from hip hop to carnival, on view at the events. The young woman wore a shimmering, shocking orange outfit with a high collar and headdress, reminiscent of Carnival costumes and Jamaican dancehall stylings, while her date sported hip hop pimp fashions.

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(Fig. 6). The young woman wore a shimmering, shocking orange outfit with a high collar and headdress, reminiscent of Carnival costumes and Jamaican dancehall stylings, while her date sported pimp fashions. Through a combination of visual, sonic, and performative means, prom-goers shine in the entrances.

In all these instances—from the flashy dress and hairstyles, cider-filled bottles, and the glittered words on cardboard banners—youth in the Bahamas convey prestige through optical means. This emphasis on the production of bling's aesthetics at the event suggests that the prom appearances, which politicians and the local media decry as "the most extravagant displays of materialism and unbridled hedonism," are only in part about the possession of things ("Prom Night" 2008). Prom-goers can appear prestigious at the event by creating bling's effects, with or without appearing in the presence of luxury goods. In this process the overvalued commodities that shine hip-hop become dematerialized, symbolized by their shining effects. It is not clear whether the substitution of light's effects for luxury goods in some instances is the result of young people who desire to represent commodities that are beyond their financial reach or whether they are in tune to the symbolic importance of light in hip-hop's bling, bling culture, or both. The emphasis on shining as a form of splendor may be interpreted as a product of the faithful translation of hip-hop's visual language or its "misrecognition" (Edwards 2003). The use of "shinnin'" on the banner (using two "n's", rather than one) suggests that both processes may be at play. Whichever might be the case, the result is the creation of an economy of prestige that may be generated through optical or metonymic means, even in the absence of expensive commodities.[10] Within the Bahamian context, by simulating the effects of shine, prom-goers, particularly male participants, accrue social currency.[11]

LIGHTS, CAMERA, ACTION: THE PHOTOGRAPHIC AFTERIMAGE AS REPRESENTATION

In addition to displaying the shine of commodities, some prom-goers appear attentive to the visual effect of light generated at the moment of being represented. Ironically, I became aware, and indeed a facilitator, of manipulating the visual effects of light during the course of shooting a documentary on the proms. A relative of the couple I was filming pulled me and my small camera crew very purposefully, despite our reluctance, into the very path of the entrance (Fig. 7). Unwittingly, we ceased to document the event and were instead co-opted into the performance. The lights from our cameras added further illumination on the prom-goers' shinin' appearances. The orchestration of our cameras as parts of the entrance, which was very much in keeping with the staging of cameras in the paparazzi entrance, emphasizes how being seen and being seen being seen and producing the light generated in the process of image creation are intrinsic to the performance frame of the proms.

The transformation of the entrances from "subtle social events" into "what can only be described as a spectacle," as one newspaper put it, has typically been attributed to an overexposure to America's celebrity culture (Wells 2004:2C). Local observers often view the spectacularization of the proms, which started in the late 1990s, as attempts by youth to mimic the "Oscars or Grammies" (Wells 2004:1C, Johnson 2004, "Prom Night" 2008). One newspaper, for instance, drew comparisons between the "exorbitant [prom] pageantries," which some spectators arrived hours in advance to see, and "Hollywood movie premieres" (Kongwa 2004). It also laid blame for the pageantry of the proms closer to home, chastising a local cable channel for promoting the elaborate proms by hosting, in a take on an American program, *Prom Idol*. A local cartoonist (Fig. 8) likened the red car-

7 High School Prom, Crystal Palace Hotel, Nassau, Bahamas, 2006.
A relative of this couple pulled me and my small camera crew into the path of the entrance. The lights from our cameras added further illumination to the prom-goers' shinin' appearance.

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pet entrances to a "circus," one in which the prom-goers aped American styles of dress (Cooper 2004). That America's media and celebrity culture influence the proms is undeniable. The prom entrances, however, do depart from these mainstream modes of celebrity. Most notably, unlike conventional Hollywood event entrances, which afford the creation and circulation of images, prom-goers express disinterest in material images. They appear more attentive to the mechanics that surround celebrity in the United States. Arguably, this is influenced in part by ways of seeing and being seen in hip-hop's culture. As with students' interest in the visual effect of shiny consumer goods, they appear aware of the visual production and effect of fame as produced on the red carpet. Their process of making a spectacle of the spectacle of celebrity is not something that students necessarily consciously set out to do. Rather they are keenly attentive to how power and prestige are visually created and incorporate what they observe into their performances. Hence, the organizer of the paparazzi entrance is less interested in producing photographs of herself than in simulating the dazzling visual effects of fame and visibility. The optical effects generated at and immediately after the moment of image creation are their own representational ends.

The influence of black American visual expressions on youth in the Bahamas recalls Diawara's analysis of the impact of African American culture on young people in Bamako, Mali, in the 1960s. He argues that the poses of soul music icons like James Brown not only inspired new approaches to fashion and self-fashioning, but radicalized how youth thought about and inhabited representation, most notably, the photograph (2005:244–61). In contrast to the staid and composed studio portraits of their forebears, he explains, youth—who were energized by the sounds and sights of the likes of James Brown—wanted to be represented in and inhabit the photographic image in an active and almost filmic way. As evident in the photographs of Malik Sidibé, many young people eschewed the artifice of the studio photograph, which they associated with the pretensions and bourgeois aspirations of an older generation. They demanded instead "a new photography that portrayed them as actors in situations," favoring more animated, candid snapshots of themselves (ibid., p. 247). A half century later, the visual cultures of hip-hop generate another diasporic aesthetic, informing and transforming black youths' understandings of their relationship to representation, and specifically to photography. Prom-goers in the Bahamas use the approaches to visuality in hip-hop

to inhabit the photographic medium in a dynamic way, as did youth in Bamako, but some of them use the entrances to produce the effects of being the photographers' subject.

The prom-goers' staging of the infrastructure and mechanics of photographic representation also brings to mind Olu Oguibe's (1996) and Christopher Pinney's (2003) discussion of the "substance of the image" and "surfacism" respectively in the African context—how photographers and clients both valued and visualized the material and illusionistic properties of photographs in vernacular picture-taking practices.[12] Both scholars highlight how in different African and Indian contexts the ability of photography to create illusion through its constitutive components —surface and light—was intrinsic to local understandings and uses of the medium in many parts of West and East Africa. Pinney cites Seydou Keïta's celebrated studio photographs of mid-twentieth-century Malian society as archetypical of surfacism, the interest in the surface of and materiality of the photograph (Fig. 9). Young people in the Bahamas in very different ways express an interest in the constitutive material qualities of the photograph and its aftereffects, but their modes of representation often reside outside of the physical properties of the photograph. By creating afterimages—the fleeting, evanescent effects of being seen being represented—and by using the substance of images and objects—light and shiny surfaces—as props, they emblazon a new type of image and self-representation.

THE SUBSTANCE OF THE IMAGE AND COLONIAL AND POSTCOLONIAL CRITIQUES

The proms also respond to and reflect social structures and visual traditions in Bahamian society. The remainder of the essay demonstrates that the premium placed on spectacularizing visibility in hip-hop informs not only performance and picturing practices in Nassau, but highlights for young people the domain of visibility as a sphere that matters, socially, politically, aesthetically, and personally. It has made black youth cognizant of how they can and *that they should* assert their visibility within their local surroundings. While youth in Nassau may draw heavily on hip-hop's lexicon, they do so in ways that speak to and through local visual languages in postcolonial Bahamian society.

Pinney again provides a particularly useful counterpoint for examining the relationship between the substance of the image and postcolonial formation. He suggests that the emphasis on tactile surface effects in photographs, seen in photographs like those of Keïta, offered an alternative to, if not eschewal of, colonial forms of representation. He contends, "What all these surfacist strategies [in India, Africa, and Latin America] have in common is their emergence in specific postcolonial contexts as expressions of identities that in complex ways repudiate the projects of which Cartesian perspectivalist images are a part" (2003:210). He interprets the foregrounding of surface as a repudiation of colonial representational traditions and the broader sociopolitical practices from which they stemmed. Diawara, in what might be viewed as an expansion of Pinney's arguments, views youth's reenvisioning of photography in Bamako as a rejection of both colonialism and the "teachings of independence, nationalism, and tradition" (2005:249). The photos from the 1960s, he maintains, reflect how youth newly approached the habitus, modernity, and (precolonial) African culture, often at odds with the state's conceptions of these terms (ibid., p. 254). Youthful Bahamian prom-goers, who also engage in practices that mobilize the "substance of the image," similarly use diasporic aesthetic strategies to reconfigure their ideals of nation, modernity, and black cultural traditions.

To contextualize the recent spectacularization of the prom entrances and the ways in which they respond to and reject the island's postcolonial politics, it is necessary to understand something about the uniqueness of the proms in the English-speaking Caribbean and their connection to the island's colonial history. The Bahamas is the only former British colony in the Caribbean where local people celebrate school proms. Geographic proximity (the islands lie just off the coast of Florida), the presence of an American expatriate community, and the popularity of American television all likely influenced the adoption of the American custom. Young people in Nassau, the islands' capital, started participating in the events soon after the Bahamas gained independence from Britain in 1973.[13] Although these early proms were also held in hotels, they otherwise lacked the fanfare, fancy cars, and production values of their more recent manifestations.[14] Students commemorating the event had their photographs taken in makeshift photographic studios set up inside the prom venue. Not coincidentally, Bahamian youth started to celebrate the prom—a rite of passage into maturity—precisely when the long-dominant British colonial social and cultural values were losing their prestige, when Bahamians sought new models of modernity, modes of self-fashioning, and means of imagining the nascent nation. In the context of the Bahamas, the institution of the prom was explicitly linked to a national coming of age.

Given this history, how might the more recent shift in the proms from an American model to a decidedly African American one be explained? If the original proms may be related to a break from colonial rule, a turning away from British to American models, what, if anything, can be made of the spectacularization of the proms, their hip-hop-inflected aesthetic? Reminiscent of the early proms, which responded to anticolonialism and emergent nationalism, the recent change in how youth represent themselves in the event may signal what Anthony Appiah describes as a "space-clearing gesture," a shift away from if not repudiation of the national project (1993:149).

The Bahamian government's recent efforts to censure or curtail the extravagant entrances highlight the seemingly antithetical relationship between the proms and the nation-state and the set of values that purportedly define postcolonial Bahamian society. In 2004 (the same year that the cable company took BET off basic cable), the minister of education, Alfred Sears, denounced the proms in a press conference, decrying the thousands of dollars spent on the entrances, rather than on education, as displays of "misguided priorities" (quoted in Kongwa 2004). "My view," he continued, "is that we have to always maintain a disciplined view as a country and maintain an element of proportionality." Nicolette Bethel, anthropologist and director at the Ministry of Culture, subsequently qualified the government's position. She explained that the government was not necessarily trying to stop the proms but urging students and their parents to make them "less elaborate."[15] In essence, they sought to lessen the financial and social

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8 Jeff Cooper
"How I See It"
Editorial cartoon, (Nassau) *Tribune*, June 22, 2004, p. 5.
A local cartoonist likened the red carpet entrances to a "circus," one in which the prom-goers paraded American styles of dress. The male figure in the cartoon notably dons a top hat in the spirit of Uncle Sam, with a star and stripes, and cane, an accessory common in hip-hop. His female companion's appearance invokes simultaneously Carmen Miranda and "national" dress at the biannual pan-Caribbean festival known as Carifesta.

investment in the entrances. While the government's concerns might not be unwarranted, the ministry's anti-prom mandate seems an unusual—and arguably, disproportionate—target of governmental policy or policing. It underscores just how much the proms, recalling the minister's words, appear to trouble national "priorities" and principles of "discipline." The government's coming out against the proms had a notable repercussion; it politicized the form as antiauthoritarian. Many entrance debutees or prom spectators that I interviewed in 2006 were cognizant of the government's desire to "stop" or "ban" the proms, as they invariably characterized it, and perceived their participation in the event as decidedly counter to the government's position and, perhaps, its national priorities.

The governmental response to the entrances must be contextualized within the more generalized criticism of the proms in newspapers, on radio shows, and by educational leaders, who invariably characterize the "trappings and glitter" of the proms as reflections of nothing short of a moral crisis (Brennen 2007). As one principal dramatically put it, "This [the prom] is a moral issue that is impacting the school system. This is a reflection of the moral decay of societal values" (Wells 2004:1C). An editorial similarly decried that the prom "brings into clear, but frightening focus, the changing values in our society and may explain, in part, the basis for some of the more vexing socio-economic problems in our youth community" ("Prom Night" 2008). In all instances, critics thought the extravagant prom entrances brought into view—into "frightening focus"—the disappearing values of Bahamian society, particularly among working-class youth who attend the island's public educational institutions. Although the spectacular proms occur across private and public school systems, critics typically perceive them as the domain of public school students.

The criticisms of the proms, taken together with Sears's words, throw into relief the "positive values" seemingly diminished in the entrances. As the latter editorial implored, "If we are to instill in our youth the tried and true values of hard work, discipline, integrity, fair play and an honest day's pay for an honest day's work, would it not be more meaningful to expend instead [of on proms], the same effort, time, energy, and resources (both human and monetary) in helping them raise their grade averages?" ("Prom Night" 2008). The comments, emphasizing the virtues of hard work, discipline, integrity, fair play, education, and an honest day's pay, are all in keeping with the mores of middle-class "respectability," the overused yet indispensable term that encapsulates so well the pillars of Caribbean middle-class society, the "tried and true" British-instilled ethics of work, thrift, discipline, education, and "purposeful self-construction," as anthropologist Peter Wilson describes it (1973:233). Local critics contend that the positive and purposeful values of education are essential to developing the nation and its global competitiveness and cast the "frivolous" investments in the momen-

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tary spectacle of the proms as portraits of and precipitators of a decaying modern and national society.

Observers who denounce the proms as embodiments of qualities that are decidedly not "respectable" may in fact have identified an important aspect of their meaning. The prom entrances, I would argue, can be interpreted as self-constructions that circumvent local social structures of respectability by projecting social status and material worth through the optics of hip-hop. Recalling Diawara's work on how diasporic aesthetics provided a model for youth in Bamako to inhabit and invent a sense of personhood outside of colonial and national models (2005), hip-hop's visual language and American celebrity culture more generally offers Bahamian youth a form through which to reenvision and emblazon their identities outside of the "tried and true" strictures of respectable postcolonial Bahamian society. At an occasion that is precisely about presenting themselves as adults, youth at prom come out in ways that veer from and even upstage the national script.

This negotiation around, and perhaps negation of, the national moral economies and social hierarchies through American and African American visual expressions resonates with anthropologist Deborah Thomas's findings in contemporary Jamaica, where she found that "people of the poorer set" saw America generally as a place that allows for social mobility not achievable in the more rigid social structures of Jamaica (2004:247). Jamaica's black working classes often used American consumer goods as "a partial eschewal of colonial and nationalist respectability …" (ibid., p. 233). Historian Harvey Neptune makes a similar point in regard to Trinidad. He argues that America, and black America specifically, has historically provided a "resource for … subordinate locals" to "transgress communal borders … [and] subvert local authority" (2003:91).

More recently, hip-hop has offered Trinidadian youth this resource. This was most publicly manifest in 2000, when Hype Williams shot a music video for hip-hop mogul Jay-Z in the island's capital, Port of Spain, using the island as a backdrop on which to stage a performance of bling, or "Big Pimpin,'" as Jay-Z's track was titled. The video's evocation of bling caused controversy when the rapper appeared on a float during the island's annual Carnival and tossed US dollar bills into the crowds. His antics came less under fire than did the response of some young spectators who eagerly pursued the money like, as calypsonian David Rudder so plainly described it, "dogs in heat" (2001). To some local guardians of the island's respectable culture, this spectacle of Trinidadian youth seemed apocalyptic: "the nation's youth had abandoned their own culture to prostitute ["pimp"] themselves for American money" (Neptune 2003:90). That the scene occurred at Carnival, the most formidable expression of "national culture," made the culture clash even more pronounced. The young Trinidadians' naked materialism unmasked, like the proms in the Bahamas, a crisis of national proportions. Both instances attest to a social phenomenon evident across the Anglophone Caribbean wherein, as anthropologist David Scott puts it, "the symbols of social solidarity that are understood to give coherence and cohesion to the social and political order," no longer serve as "the generative source of the authoritative signifiers of an approved life" (1999:192). In Trinidad and the Bahamas, the flash of bling upstaged the approved signifiers of respectability or sanctioned national culture.

Many twenty-first-century youth in the Bahamas use the proms as their forbearers in Nassau did in the era of independence, to pursue and present modes of self-representation that transcend the prevailing signifiers of ruling society. While manifestations of materialism among youth in the Bahamas (and elsewhere in the region) may be viewed as a capitulation to American capitalism and a false sense of value as an affront to national models of progress and propriety, these expressions may represent what Thomas characterizes as a desire "for a particular kind of modernity that in specific social realms is 'co-produced' with other diasporic communities" (2004:260). The prom entrances are products of this particular kind of modernity, or its reconfiguration, that is created between diasporic communities. Hip-hop in part has transmitted a set of visual languages and bodily practices to black youth, which they use to participate in "a type of modernity," through which they can be seen as global and modern by being illuminated by light, by inflecting global structures of representation, by sharing in the choreography of visual practices that offer prestige across African diasporic contexts. The optics of hip-hop provide a luminous framework for youth to see themselves and have themselves seen as modern and global subjects and consumers, a perspective that looks horizontally across the African diaspora rather than upwardly at local social hierarchies. The diasporic dream work of hip-hop's visual cultures in this way brings "a community into being through performance, and it maps out real and imagined relations between people that speak to the realities of displacement, disillusion, and despair created by the austerity economy of post-industrial capitalism" (Lipsitz 1994:36).

One of the local criticisms of the proms is that students, by not following the approved values of the nation, will not be prepared to compete globally—to be citizens of the world.[16] It is clear, however, that hip-hop offers both real and imagined ways of being (or appearing to be) global through capitalism and the commodity's effects. This process of cultural formation may also be encapsulated in the concept of bling, not only because of its centrality to diasporic aesthetics, but because bling may be thought of onomatopoeically, like *ka-ching*, to evoke a commercial transaction. Bling is the sound of cultural exchange through commodities and the sound of diasporic cultures' interactions with global capitalism. Although consumerism is at the heart of this coproduction of diaspora, it is crucial to note that hip-hop's aesthetics, while seeming on the surface a hyperbolic version of late capitalism, result in visual economy wherein one's social capital comes in part through the aesthetics of light. Shinin' generates its own social currency and expression of value through optical effect, with or without commodities. Indeed, this alternate system of prestige may be what authorities in the Bahamas find so troubling or threatening to national values, and so incomprehensible and incalculable.

CONCLUSION

While youth in the Bahamas use hip-hop's visual language to imagine and represent themselves as visible, diasporically and globally, in ways that appear to circumvent local structures

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of status, their practices shed light on the performances that afford visibility and prestige in postcolonial Bahamian society. The entrances make a spectacle of hypervisible signifiers of the "approved life," those performances of status through material goods that take place routinely in contemporary Bahamian society, but frequently go unrecognized as such. In contrast to their criticism of public school students for their ostentation at prom, the media or ministers of parliament seldom remark on the routine displays of high-end consumer goods in Nassau made by the island's middle and upper classes or winter residents. For example, while critics decry the flotilla of Rolls Royces and Lexuses at the proms, these vehicles are sometimes borrowed or rented from wealthy Bahamians who use them on a daily basis. Indeed, one newspaper reported that it was common for residents of affluent communities, such as Eastern Road, to get knocks on their doors during prom season from persons wanting to rent their cars (Wells 2004:2C). In other words, the prom entrances actually put everyday symbols of wealth on display, incorporating them in ways that highlight their commodity status, their enviable shine. By using, literally and figuratively, everyday vehicles of social visibility in Bahamian society in their entrances, the prom-goers render visible the routine exhibitions of conspicuous consumption to which Bahamian society usually turns a blind eye. Moreover, the prom entrances not only highlight the most visible structures and symbols of prestige but their inverse, the blinding disappearance of persons who do not possess symbols of the "approved life." In these stagings, bling denotes spectacular wealth and, simultaneously, illuminates the condition of *not* being seen—the condition of working-class youth who are not typically recognized in approving ways locally.

Hip-hop's visual expressions then not only offer a mode of self-fashioning within and beyond national models of personhood, but inform broader approaches to visibility that young people use to negotiate and even negate postcolonial social and political structures. At the proms, African diasporic forms provide the framework through which youth visualize, articulate, and transform themselves beyond the strictures of social and representational possibilities of postcolonial Bahamian society. It is tempting to see the proms as part of a genealogy of African diasporic practices of contestation, of opposition to the governing classes. While this is certainly a part of the story, what the proms ultimately provide is a way of seeing or visualizing power in the postcolony, whether through particular commodities and their optical effects or through spaces of visibility like the hotel entrance. In other words, hip-hop's language of shine, shimmer, and splendor throws a light on postcolonial structures of visibility, highlighting the spectacular performance of power in everyday forms of prestige. The ways of seeing that hip-hop inspires call to mind the little boy in "The Emperor's New Clothes," the well-known fable of the spectacle of power. Hip-hop offers a way of seeing and seeing through performances of prestige, of understanding of its visual production, and of reenvisioning self and social status through its optics.

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Notes

1 The costs of the proms vary. According to one local report, the average cost is $1,500, with dresses typically amounting to between $350 and $900. Rental cars average approximately $500 (Wells 2004:2C). Another account puts the cost of dresses alone between $700 and $1000 dollars (Deleveaux 2008:C3). Or as a columnist inventories, "the cost for dresses, suits, limousines, hairstyles, can far exceed the tuition for one school term or even a year or two in some cases. The $300 hair 'dos, $300 limousines, $150 suit rentals, $800 bear-top formal gowns, $150 shoes, can add up to a down payment for a small home" (Brennen 2007).

For an account of the different entrances, see Butler (2005): "Last year apparently a couple showed up in a helicopter, it would seem as though limousines no longer provide a touch of class. Others arrive in vehicles escorted by horses; have doves fly out of vehicles; step onto red carpets or rose petal strewn floors and some even come in our local horse drawn carriages which I am led to believe can cost in excess of two hundred & fifty dollars for this little jaunt. There are even those who now have junkanoo [sic] groups or other musicians awaiting their arrival so the same can be heralded."

2 The proms not only refract hip-hop's shine through the lens of postcolonial social and political structures, but do so in ways that reflect local aesthetic traditions. Indeed, hip-hop's visual culture may have appealed to prom-goers in part because shine, shimmer, and splendor are intrinsic to local costuming traditions. In particular, the biannual parade known locally as Junkanoo—which one historian characterizes as "an annual spectacle to our nation that is unparalleled in splendour"—may have informed youth's predilection for hip hop among other contemporary diasporic visual cultures (Nash-Ferguson 2000:vi). In other words, hip-hop did not inspire youth simply to demand visibility through its aesthetic expressions, but to do so in ways that resonate locally, to coproduce a visual expression capable of inflecting recognized Bahamian artistic practices.

3 While some critics sound concern over the negative influence of American culture on Bahamian youth in general, they typically single out African American culture and hip-hop culture in particular. For one, Quentin Laroda, vice president of the teachers' union, attributed violence in schools to "American 'hip hop' culture, in which it is 'cool' to be a thug" (Rolle 2008). As he elaborated, "I think the violence in our society is based on a culture of imitation of the American cultures and some cultures of other countries as well … the influence of rap and hip hop is greatly underestimated … If you look at their [young people's] behaviour, it mimics a lot of the rap songs they listen to. The girls behave like they are in a rap video and the boys behave the same way." Ian Strachan, professor at the College of the Bahamas, expressed a similar view. "Young girls in the society seem to see it as a badge of honor to have a bandit or gangsta man, or a child father who is either in jail or just getting out of jail. The music videos on BET and MTV often feature a lot of gangsta rap which further glamorizes and glorifies this lifestyle" (Strachan 2008).

4 Eartha Hanna, interview with author, Nassau, Bahamas, June 24, 2006.

5 Cisco McKay, interview with author, Nassau, Bahamas, June 24, 2006.

6 For examples of bling's blinding effect in hip-hop, see B.G. 1999 and Tymers 1998.

7 This use of the effect of light and the frame of visibility in late twentieth-century hip hop may be further elucidated by considering rapper (and CEO) Jay-Z's (Shawn Carter) signature use of a hand gesture, the "ROC" sign, simulates the shape of a diamond. Carter first started using the diamond shape as a symbol of his company, Roc-a-Fella Records, and its three partners, but it soon became the rapper's trademark, a sign he flashed on the red carpet or on stage, which audiences would, in performative call and response, mirror.

8 Interviews with author, Nassau, Bahamas: Pedro Burrows, June 24, 2006; Sandra Ferguson, June 10, 2006; Tabatha Griffin, June 10, 2006; Cisco McKay, June 24, 2006; Nadia Miller, June 24, 2006; Godwin Sherwin, June 24, 2006; Jaime Taylor, June 24, 2006.

9 Miriam Dean, interview with author, Nassau, Bahamas, June 17, 2006. The boy's mother explained that her son came up with the idea for his attire and she designed the outfit herself. With preschool proms, as with the high school ones, the entrances are a collaboration between the students and their parents.

10 The concept of "new economies of prestige" comes to George Lipsitz's observations on hip hop (1994:33).

11 While male prom participants, even the preschoolers, reflect bling's shine, females tend to convey their splendor and prestige in ways not directly related to hip-hop's aesthetics. The teenage female prom participants typically appear to be much more inspired by the dresses worn by characters in fairy tales than by the pimp stylings of hip-hop. At the high school proms young women, outfitted in what a local dress-store manager described as "Cinderella-styled dresses" (Deleveaux 2008:C3), may be fit into glass slippers held

on satin pillows by kneeling dates, or may appear in horse-driven carriages transformed into pumpkins. Other young women, modeling themselves on Snow White, arrive in coffins to be awakened by their Prince Charmings. The fairy tale aesthetics at prom can also be related to local and Caribbean-wide traditions of crowning queens in such contexts as friendly societies, beauty pageants, or Jamaican dancehalls. Numerous critics have remarked on the limited role of women in hip-hop and its visual manifestations; often, women figure as one among rappers' many shiny possessions. It is perhaps unsurprising, then, that many young women turn to or incorporate a different aesthetics of light in their self-idealized performances at prom.

12 Oguibe's observations are largely based on Stephen Sprague's (1978) research among the Yoruba in Nigeria in the 1970s.

13 Nicolette Bethel, interview with author, Nassau, Bahamas, August 29, 2006.

14 Columnist and contemporary prom critic Craig Butler recalls the following of about his prom in the early 1980s. "The event itself was funded by us students. We held bake sales, car washes, uniform release days and walk-a-thons to raise the money. There was no charge to attend. Any personal expenses incurred were from the clothes bought for the event and whether or not we hired a limousine to take you there. The only costs involved were covered by hitting your parents up for enough money in your pockets so you could go to Pastiche and Waterloo. All these were modest costs when compared to the sums of today's events" (Butler 2005).

15 Nicolette Bethel, interview with author, Nassau, Bahamas, August 29, 2006.

16 "Rather than concentrating too much on materialism, the focus should instead be on education and bringing up educational standard [sic], so that Bahamian youth can compete globally" ("What Are Parents Thinking?" 2004).

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