

# DOWN TOWN LADIES

INFORMAL COMMERCIAL IMPORTERS,  
A HAITIAN ANTHROPOLOGIST,  
AND SELF-MAKING IN JAMAICA

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FOR LAMERCIE LAFRANCE & JULIETTE MARIE JAVE

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## CHAPTER TWO

## From Higglering to Informal Commercial Importing

Foreign higglers are part of a new set of survival economic adaptations to the world's emergent economic crisis for which the formal sectors are running out of conventional answers.—Carl Stone

The unchallenged trade by the higglers cannot continue—it will bury us!—Douglas Vaz

The historical development of informal commercial importing extends back to the earliest days of slavery, when the higgler emerged. The word *higgle* means to hawk or peddle provisions. This trading activity is popular throughout the entire Caribbean. Because it is so widespread, it has various names on other islands. In Jamaica, popular and colloquial use of “higgler” refers to any small-scale distributor, male or female. While this name applies to anyone who hawks, it has historically been gendered, and has a gendered connotation. In this study, I use “higgler” specifically to indicate a market trader or a middleperson who primarily distributes his or her own agricultural goods. Higglers are distinct from hawkers or vendors in that they are sellers who deal exclusively in farm provisions, locally grown or imported. The hawker or vendor trades in dry goods and/or cooked foods.

Tracing the evolution of the higgler in Jamaican history is synonymous with investigating the rise of the internal market system that developed alongside the colonial empire's extractive economy. From its emergence, higglering has been simultaneously a site of contestation and negotiation between the state and civil society (especially between the middle and upper classes), merchants and consumers, and individuals and their

communities. Historically, these conflicts have arisen when the state attempts to regulate informal marketing activities that often compete with established merchants. In addition, despite ongoing tensions, higglering has proliferated. Opportunities continue to open, allowing marketers to participate in the local-global economy as they are enabled to challenge the social order. In the 1970s, other branches of higglering expanded as a significant number of new recruits infiltrated the burgeoning informal import/export market. State reaction to this growth in independent international trading not only replayed the battles of the colonial past, but also created new sites of struggles as both “space” and “place” became contested terrains.

In this chapter, I outline historical developments of independent marketing from higglering to the more recent informal commercial importing. I describe this expansion within a broader political-economic context to illustrate how interconnections between local and global relations impact participants. Hence, my intention here is not to provide a history of higglering per se, but to highlight the continuities and discontinuities in this trade and in the larger sociopolitical environment from which it stemmed. To achieve this, I divide this chapter into three parts. First, I trace the progression of higglering from its inception during slavery to its alterations after Jamaica's independence. Second, I evaluate a range of factors that influence and characterize Jamaica's contemporary market system and highlight differences and varieties among higglers. This provides a sociohistorical background that sets the stage for the arrival of ICIs. Until ICIs were given an official title, they were known interchangeably as “foreign higglers,” “traveling higglers,” “international higglers,” or “suitcase traders.” “Foreign” refers to anything abroad, in this case the location of traders' work. Finally, I outline the actual entrance of the vendors during the late 1970s and subsequent attempts by ruling Jamaican governments to regulate their activities. Foreign higglers emerged from a transnational socioeconomic field that continues to sustain their growth. Their relative success puts them in constant conflict with the state and big business. Over the years, higglers have organized in ad hoc and sometimes more formal fashion to respond to the government's efforts to control the boom in this occupation. I provide an account of one such organization, the United Vendors Association, founded in 1979 by several Garveyite Rastafari committed to black economic advancement. I conclude the chapter with a deconstruction of the paradoxes of formalization that includes a discussion of policies concerning ICIs as floating signifiers and

considers the ways in which their given official title only relegated traders further to the social and political margins of Jamaican society.

### Slavery/Emancipation and the Internal Market System

The British captured Xaymaca from Spain in 1655, nearly a century after they had established the Royal Africa Company to facilitate importing Africans for enslavement in the West Indian colonies. After fifty years, the native Arawak population had been wiped out—victims of the genocide so characteristic of most colonial encounters in the Caribbean. The forced migration of Africans for slaves and Europeans for indentured servitude increased the growth of sugar production. In the English Caribbean, Jamaica was the island with the largest sugar output. Production grew concomitantly with the importation of the enslaved labor force necessary to sustain this rapid growth. By 1768, the total population of the island was 187,700, of which slaves numbered 167,000, whites 17,000, and the colored and free black population, 3,700 (Heuman 1981:7).<sup>1</sup> To escalate the level of sugar production and maximize profits, planters implemented an arduous seasonal work cycle forcing the enslaved to labor eleven to eighteen hour days. To sustain this population at a low cost, property owners encouraged and established a food production system on their plantations.

The various causes of the enslaved's independent subsistence farming and other economic activities are topics that still fuel great debate among scholars, particularly historians. The point at which plots of land were allocated as provision grounds is contested, as are the circumstances that led to their distribution. However, many agree that planters were not over-come with humanistic or altruistic motives. Rather, as Sidney Mintz puts it, planters' decisions were simply based on "classical economic considerations of diminishing returns" (1974:192). They responded to the economic risks they faced. First, the poor quality of slaves' diet resulted in malnutrition and starvation, as well as a high mortality rate and loss of capital value as planters had to replace lost slaves (Craton 1977:2, Higman 1976:114). Allowing slaves to grow their own food on provision grounds reduced the planters' expenditures, which included importing food to feed their labor force. The imported food was supplemented with herring and saltfish, typically allotted to the enslaved.

Second, there was an abundance of land, and planters were willing to use it for provision grounds. As Jamaican topography is not wholly

suitable to grow sugarcane, unprofitable plots were allocated to slaves to cultivate their aliments. On some plantations, there were "common grounds" used for the general food production for all residents of entire estates. The main provision grounds were usually located at great distances from the plantations. On the days they were granted free time for their own food production, slaves planted and tended to guinea corn, plantains, coconut, potatoes, maize, and yams. On other plantations, they also cultivated small "house plots" or "polinks" (small "garden spots" that adjoined their homes) in addition to their provision grounds. The cultivated surplus from these spots was often used for marketing purposes.<sup>2</sup> The provision ground system benefited planters in many ways. It was also a critical factor in the development of the enslaved population's informal economic activities, their identities, subjectivities, and consciousness as proto-peasants.

In 1662, seven years after the British took possession of the island, the first known market was established to serve free inhabitants in Spanish Town. In less than a quarter of a century, several other markets were operating. By 1720, numerous markets were established, formalized and maintained by colonial administrators throughout the island. This means that there may have been white higgler as well. However, slave higgler initially entered the market to sell their masters' goods. They were sent out to peddle wares. According to Lorna Simmonds, within the Kingston area "many female slaves seemed to have been involved almost exclusively in higglering and/or vending of some product . . . others described as domestics were hawking wares about the streets of towns for their masters, or more specifically for their mistress' benefit" (1985:5). Those employed as hawkers who were not supervised had ample opportunity to trade their own goods.

Nonetheless, details of the enslaved's entry into the marketplace for their own exchanges are sparse.<sup>3</sup> Trading, however, had long existed among this population before they entered into the market proper. Some observers of these transactions noted that since they were not supervised in their own food production, the enslaved did as they wished with their surplus (Mintz 1974). Cultivators of different products engaged in exchange and redistribution with each other on their own terms. The managerial staff provided limited surveillance, and as a result they could not prevent such transactions between slaves of the same estate, or even adjacent ones (Mintz 1974). The first markets were managed by whites of the planter class to serve whites and the freed population. Eventually, the enslaved population took this system over, and, simultaneously, provision grounds

and market-related activities became sites of continuous discord between the enslaved, masters, and landless whites, creating a legacy of conflict that still exists today. In fact, when slaves' food production rose, their rations were reduced and new responsibilities were piled on to cut into the time they had for marketing activities (Berlin and Morgan 1991:21).

Planters were threatened by the enslaved's entrepreneurial activities. As they became an integral part of the market, the enslaved faced greater opposition from planters and colonial administrators. On some plantations, owners prevented them from helping each other cultivate their grounds. Legislative measures were also established and enforced to restrict or prohibit their autonomous economic activities. For example, the enslaved could not participate in the market unless they carried a permit from their master-employer. To prevent them from dealing in stolen goods, restrictions were placed on the items they could sell. The provisions brought to market could only be food that they had produced. Initially, the enslaved were allowed to sell provisions such as fruits, fresh milk, poultry, and other small livestock. Certain provisions were perceived as implicit determinants of one's status. According to Mintz, "a slave with a carcass of beef was, *prima facie*, guilty of having slaughtered his owner's cattle" (1974:198). However, in the mid-1700s, the provisions the enslaved took to the market had expanded to include fish, poultry, pigs, and goats, and they not only traded, but also exchanged these for cash. As higglers became increasingly important to the local market, attempts to regulate their activities often were unsuccessful (Simmonds 1985:10).

The failure of the colonial authorities' attempts to regulate the enslaved's participation in the Sunday market resulted in the latter's domination of this venue. By the eighteenth century, an extensive market system emerged that was operated mostly by slaves. Throughout the island, market practices differed depending on the contrasting pattern of division of labor in rural and urban areas. In rural settings, where males and females worked as field hands, market activities were family oriented. Men, women, and children cultivated provision grounds and house plots. Since everyone participated in subsistence activities, it is very likely that they also performed specific market tasks. In towns, subjugated females served as domestics, cooks, nursemaids, and nannies, whereas males served as bakers, caulkers, carpenters, masons, silversmiths, and brick makers (Simmonds 1985:2-3). Many of them were taken away from their trade and sent to earn income for their owners. Urban slaves or freed people attended the market as customers, artisans, traders, and distributors. In that

context, Simmonds asserts, rural slave higglers became an important link between the provision cultivator and the urban consumer:

They facilitated the distribution of a wide variety of imports, local products and provision grounds during their time off... The rural female slave higglers provided the chief means by which the rural slave population was able to acquire the necessary and desired supplements to the basics provided by their owners, and some urban slaves were able to obtain the entire means for subsistence independent of their owners. (1985:8)

At times, among the enslaved, rural higglers actually held a monopoly on the supply of provisions sold to urban dwellers. This elicited serious complaints from whites, documented in journals and bulletins about the practices of higglers, because they controlled and increased prices of country provisions whenever they saw fit (Simmonds 1985:8).

As the market took on new importance to the enslaved, they participated with a fervor that caught the attention of many visitors to the island who recorded them in their travelogues.<sup>4</sup> For the enslaved population, the market had a variety of social meanings. It was a gathering place where they made contact with family and friends and found entertainment; the meeting at the market was also their opportunity for exchanging information. Hence, it is not surprising that rural dwellers walked as many as twenty-five miles carrying goods on their heads to attend the town Sunday market. During the later periods of slavery, this market was so well integrated into the Jamaican economy that it supplied meats, vegetables, and fruits to the enslaved population as well as to the freed population and whites. With the money earned, they bought food, clothing, furniture, tobacco, and other consumer goods. Sometimes, this income also helped defray the cost of manumission for themselves or their kin.<sup>5</sup> It has been estimated that by the late eighteenth century (around 1770) nearly 20 percent of the capital circulating in the island of Jamaica was actually owned by the enslaved (Mintz 1974:199). Marketing activities by this population became so essential to the stability of the island that some stringent laws restricting slaves' mobility were actually relaxed for Sunday marketing activities, with masters granting slaves permission to participate in markets even during the most tense times (Momsen 1988:218).

As Mintz notes, the provision grounds and independent economy were a social contradiction to the institution of slavery that was advantageous to both parties, but especially to planters because they reduced the

likelihood of rebellion or maroonage (Price 1996). Hence, they represented a "temporary solution" in this system of exploitation.<sup>6</sup> The material and psychosocial importance of slaves' higglering activities made provision grounds paramount in emancipation debates, especially since these grounds were arguably the property of those who tended them. That is, they were treated as private and inheritable property, property the enslaved could will to their children. In some cases, they were even reimbursed when the properties were sold.<sup>7</sup> Unsurprisingly, during the four-year apprenticeship<sup>8</sup> period, which followed the abolition of slavery, house plots and provision grounds were crucial issues in negotiations between the newly freed population and the former masters, who were desperate for laborers. Many of the former masters used these grounds in various ways to exploit the freedmen and freedwomen, who had become dependent on the provisions they cultivated and their participation in the internal market system. Former masters charged high rents, paid relatively low wages for labor, and offered exploitative contracts (Bolland 1993) that in many ways kept the new freedmen and freedwomen socioeconomically enslaved.

After full emancipation on August 1, 1838, the newly freed population faced a dilemma given the aforementioned factors and the insecurity of land tenure from planters. Many were forced to seek other opportunities away from the estates where they had been enslaved (Bolland 1993). In other cases, many remained on plantations and negotiated with planters to maintain access to their provision grounds (Besson 2002, Marshall 1985, Scott 1985). Sheller elaborates on this: "There is evidence that ex-slaves were attached to their houses, gardens and provision grounds, which in many cases had valuable mature trees or ripening crops, not to mention burial places of their ancestors" (1998:115). While free villages continued to be established, primarily by Baptist missionaries, squatting, especially on Crown lands, became a pervasive practice among the landless freed who were determined to acquire property (Besson 2002:89-93). During this time, the small-farm sector grew rapidly. At the end of the apprenticeship period, planters charged exorbitant rents to the newly freed population in order to extract labor from them (Holt 1992:107). At times, they demanded double the rent from those who did not work on the property. In other cases, entire households, including women and children, were charged rent for use of the provision grounds (Holt 1992, Morrissey 1989, Sheller 1998). In that sense, women were doubly exploited on the basis of their race and gender. The newly freed departed from the larger

estates.<sup>9</sup> "They started small farms on the peripheries of plantation areas, wherever they could find land" (Marshall 1985:2). By the first year of the official census (1844), 80 percent of the island's workforce was engaged in agriculture (Eisner 1961). As these activities increased, so did divisions and patterns of labor.

### **Towards Independence: Specialized Higglering**

By the middle of the nineteenth century, Jamaica was in a state of social transition and economic upheaval. The Apprenticeship Act had expired in 1838, and the decline of sugar production had influenced the plantation labor system.<sup>10</sup> Facing labor shortages and needing to keep wages down, planters, with the aid of the colonial administration, began to conscript and lure greater numbers of indentured laborers from India, Java, and China.<sup>11</sup> Since the late seventeenth century, several other groups of immigrants had also arrived on the island. These included Jewish and Lebanese/Syrian<sup>12</sup> immigrants who arrived initially as traders and quickly amassed capital and became merchants.<sup>13</sup> By the turn of the century, the number of East Indians had surpassed the population of whites; soon, the Chinese population became more numerous than the white population.

With this increased competition for work, dire socioeconomic conditions, and a limited definition of freedom, tensions arose between the newly freed population and the planter class. According to Jamaican historian Swithin Wilmott, one of the key issues causing the strain was the newly freed population's lack of access to ownership of property (1993). Owning land has historically been central to both legal and social concepts of citizenship (Maurer 2000). The denial of land and civil rights eventually resulted in insurrections and riots that brought black and brown populations together throughout the island and in other parts of the region. The most documented of these was the 1865 Paul Bogle insurrection (Robotham 1985). At issue was land. According to Woodville K. Marshall, "insecurity of land tenure, as well as relatively low wages for plantation labour, sometimes high rents, and low contracts reinforced many ex-slaves' determination to seek new and better opportunities away from estates" (1985:3). Squatting, especially near old provision grounds, continued to be rampant. Consequently, so did small farming, which caused rapid growth of the peasantry, increased petty trading activities, and heightened the "visibility" of females in the market place.

The issue of the visibility of females in the marketplace during this period ought to be viewed in relation to a series of dire socioeconomic conditions resulting from emancipation. The increasing role of Jamaican females in their household economy is due, in part, to the relative absence of a permanent male partner's income and the fact that female dominance of market activities is one of the Africanisms retained in the New World.<sup>14</sup> Indeed, during the mid to late nineteenth century, the Jamaican population had a higher number of females than males. This was the case even during slavery. The gap increased and contributed to the persistent gendering of the trade. Women's domination of the market was due to changes in the occupational structure, internal migration patterns due to urbanization (Edwards 1980), and external migration, among other factors. Men left the island in search of better wages and greater opportunities.<sup>15</sup> This migration trend is endemic to the region. Its roots can be traced back to the nineteenth century, when laborers migrated intraregionally to find better work. Decreased demand for skilled and unskilled laborers, both rural and urban, forced Jamaicans to move to other countries, where they became service workers.<sup>16</sup> Migration patterns reflect waves of travel to countries where employment opportunities and wages were greater and the work was temporary and would allow households to maintain their provision grounds or plots. During the 1950s, many men migrated to Panama, where wages on the Panama Railway were three times the earnings in Jamaica (McLean Petras 1988:68-70). This mass migration had other effects including a disproportionately high number of female-headed households. Furthermore, fewer opportunities for market-based employment of men on the island made a second dependable income in the home more important.

In her Ph.D. dissertation, "Role and Status of Rural Jamaican Women: Higglering and Mothering," based on research conducted in St. Mary during the 1970s, anthropologist Victoria Durant-Gonzalez found a direct correlation between women choosing higglering and men lacking employment. She writes:

Economic pressures, combined with the lack of job opportunity and the familial role of mother, are influences that lead to higglering. These factors are so patterned among higglers that they can serve as a model for phasing into higglering and continuing to pursue this occupation. This model can be stated as the need for cash income, the lack of permanent work for men, limited job options open to women with limited salable skills, and children to provide for. (1976:172)

Nearly two decades later, sociologist Elsie Le Franc arrived at the same findings. She notes, "one of the more important reasons for the entry of women into higglering has indeed been the uncertainty and even absence of the economic contribution of a male partner... for a very long time higglering has had to substitute for, rather than simply supplement the male breadwinner's contribution" (1989:116). This also reinforces the lady/woman trope, as women are seen to take on the masculine role as well, thereby further distancing them from the femininity associated with ladies. This emphasis on one's income, the broadening of one's social base, and that sense of independence continue to keep this occupation popular among females. Another factor is that even in conjugal unions, females in the Caribbean have historically retained considerable autonomy, especially over economic matters. Thus, it wasn't surprising that this activity experienced a boom. According to Gisela Eisner, by the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the number of petty traders/higglers increased rapidly. In 1861, there were 437 documented petty traders; by 1921, that number had increased to 4,164.<sup>17</sup>

At the turn of the twentieth century, as market trading activities surged, economic independence and social recognition continued to elude the poor black masses. They had little or no access to basic needs and resources and no possibilities for social mobility. Many aspects of their life conditions were similar to slavery. They were marginal and desperate. Their need for racial and class consciousness and socioeconomic and political independence was articulated by Marcus Garvey. In 1914, Garvey founded the Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA). Initially, the UNIA was a social welfare organization that sought to raise funds, feed the poor, and provide social services to the needy (Martin 1991). In 1916, the UNIA left Jamaica and relocated in New York. There it emerged as an international movement concerned with terminating the global exploitation of blacks and reuniting the black diaspora. Stressing the importance of self-reliance, Garvey advocated economic and social independence of peoples of African descent in the New World and repatriation to Africa. Under his motto "One Aim, One God, One Destiny," he mobilized masses of the black diaspora to participate in numerous economic activities. In 1928, Garvey returned to Jamaica with a more explicit black nationalist agenda. He formed the People's Political Party (PPP) and started a daily newspaper, *The Blackman*. His efforts failed under the colonial administration's pressures. According to Carl Stone, Garvey's emphasis on race contested the multiracial, nonethnic nationalism



that was being professed by the new order of privileged ethnic minorities: mainly the Jews, browns, Chinese, and Lebanese (Stone 1991). He was seen as subversive to this power structure and was labeled a "dangerous element" that threatened the seeming unity of the island as propagated by the middle and upper classes. Garvey was eventually driven out of Jamaica for stirring up racial/color tensions.

Several years later, Garvey's efforts were validated in the labor riots of 1938, which echoed the cries of the 1865 rebellion led by Paul Bogle. The riots eventually resulted in changes to local political structures. It was out of this popular movement that Jamaica's two main political parties were formed. The two key figures were Alexander Bustamante and his cousin Norman Manley. After travels to Cuba, Panama, and the U.S., Bustamante returned home and established himself as a private moneylender. As such, he became aware of the abject poverty that plagued his nation. This prompted him to eventually become a fierce union organizer. Norman Manley was a Rhodes scholar and, at the time, Jamaica's leading lawyer. His interests were in promoting social and economic developments locally; he was not interested in politics (Post 1978). In the aftermath of the 1938 labor rebellion, he began to work on the formation of a political party concerned with the working class. The PNP was inaugurated with Bustamante, then a leading trade unionist at the platform, as a member of the party. In their own ways, they were strong leaders who agitated for the rights of the masses. After Bustamante formed the first trade union in Jamaica, tensions increased between the two leaders. Eventually, the labor organizer broke from the People's National Party (PNP) and founded the Jamaica Labour Party (JLP). Thus did the two government parties that continue to dominate Jamaican politics come to be. Both played significant roles in turning colonial authorities' attention to the desperate conditions of the masses. However, the relationship between these middle-class leaders and the masses foreshadows the character of their governments' relations with the majority population.

Between 1944 and 1962, throughout the transfer of power from the colonial administration to local politicians, a system of state clientelism emerged that propelled and sustained the dominant middle-class party leaders.<sup>18</sup> Across the social structure, party leaders manipulated resources and formulated a patron-client relationship with voters. This clientelism was a male-dominated system in which both the client and the patron were male, making policies and state initiatives patriarchal in character.

The middle class used clientelism as a mechanism to control and demobilize the lower classes, which had to seek advantages through clientelist structures (Edie 1991:20). With the elite and upper classes, this relationship manifested differently. However, among the poor, a vote cast for the right candidate could result in employment, food, bureaucratic favors, and help in time of crisis. At this time, the economic disparity was quite high, as 57 percent of the population was considered poor. For the black masses who occupied the lowest rung of the socioeconomic ladder, this interdependency was unviable. Only a limited number of them had access to education, which was the primary vehicle for social mobility.<sup>19</sup> With these restricted opportunities and no state advocate to turn to and no reliable welfare system, economic independence was a necessity.

For lower-class females, employment was even more crucial, as they headed over a third of all households in the country (Clarke 1957, Powell 1986, Momsen 1988). Higglering was one of the occupations that allowed them to maintain a livelihood. Erna Brodber confirmed this trend in her collection of life histories of Jamaican females at the turn of the twentieth century. An outstanding figure in her research was Mother Brown, who was born in 1861 and died in 1973. Mother Brown was a small farmer who cultivated yams, potatoes, and cassava on a plot of land with her mother. As she grew older, her own daughter took over management. Her family lived in Devon for generations. From there, they took provisions to the Mandeville market, leaving home on Fridays and staying over on Saturdays until they completed their sales. The women in Mother Brown's household had all different types of relationships with men. However, these men played only a peripheral role in their economic lives (Brodber 1986:30). According to Powell, "women do not separate earning an income from other aspects of their lives. Recent studies have shown that a woman's ability to provide for herself and her children is closely linked to her perceptions of her own worth and the esteem in which she is held by her community as both a mother and a woman" (1986:83). Even when men are present in their households, the women still consider the children their primary responsibility. Those who participate in higglering do so to replace the absent family wage of the male breadwinner and to fulfill societal expectations of their gender.

As an occupation, higglering had undergone few changes in the earlier parts of the twentieth century. The first two studies by anthropologists on higglering have contributed to our understanding of several aspects of

the trade and its participants. The first study, by Margaret Katzin (1960), entailed a classification system of traders. Based on research conducted in Mandeville during the mid-1950s, her methods may be dated, as they sought to create a taxonomy and had limited social analysis. However, her typologies point to the specialization in higglering. She distinguished between urban and rural higglers mainly on the basis of residential location and the source of the goods they distributed:

#### A. Rural Residents

1. *Country People*; women who sell produce grown by someone in their own households.
2. *Weekend Country Higglers*; women from areas within 25 miles of Kingston, who buy wholesale in Coronation and sell there at retail.
3. *Country Higglers*; women who buy produce from growers near their rural homes and sell it in Coronation.
4. *Planter Higglers or Speculators*; mostly men who may grow part of their stock, but differ from country higglers principally because they cover wider distances to buy a large quantity of one commodity and transport it a greater distance, often over 50 miles, to market.

#### B. Kingston Residents.

1. *Tray Girls*; women who carry their total stock on a tray or flat basket.
2. *Weekend Town Higglers*; women who buy wholesale in Coronation and sell there at retail on Thursdays, Fridays and Saturdays.
3. *Town Higglers*; women who rent market stalls for which they pay a weekly fee that entitles them to sell at any time the market is open.
4. *Vendors*; town higglers who rent several stalls and specialize in one item, such as tomatoes. (Katzin 1960:298)

Twenty years later, Durant-Gonzalez (1976) came up with the following typology, in which the source of goods resurfaces as the primary criterion and the marketing location, both social and physical, of the buyer becomes irrelevant. She also pays particular attention to gender:

1. Farmer vendor—sells produce from her own or her husband's farm.
2. Farmer higgler—sells produce from other farms as well as her own.
3. Country higgler—only buys and sells, resides in the rural areas; comes to town during market days to sell her provisions.

4. Town higgler—only buys and sells, is a resident in the towns, and operates only within the towns.
5. Seller of locally manufactured goods.

Durant-Gonzales's typologies, though rigid, highlight how higglering, as a system or network of distribution, continues to be heterogeneous and complex and involves different groups of individuals who participate in various aspects of this network at different stages. Katzin's system of classification is particularly illuminating, as it considers both the position and location of participants from which one could infer subjectivities, since higglering has always been a class-specific phenomenon. More recently, several development-oriented studies have also created higgler profiles that include more personal demographics on participants. From these we learned that the local or traditional higgler is usually a rural female of African descent between the ages of twenty-nine and forty-nine who has achieved only a relatively low level of education, probably about three years of primary school.<sup>20</sup> Below is a profile of a town higgler from my own research conducted in 1993. This example highlights a particular higgler who fits into both of the classification systems noted above. She is a town resident who rents a stall in the market, where she sells the goods she buys from farmer higglers.

Miss J. is in her late forties. She is a town higgler (as defined by Katzin) who lives in Gordon Town (in the parish of St. Andrew) and orders her produce from country people in Trelawny. When she receives the goods she pays wholesale for them. She learned about the trade as a child, when she accompanied her grandmother, who was a higgler, to the market every weekend. Miss J. decided to become a higgler because "it was the best thing to try to do" to help out her family. She knew she would always make money in it. She has been a higgler for twenty years and had been in Papine for nineteen of those years. She used to sell outside of Papine, but the rain and constant thievery eventually forced her to obtain a space inside the market. Rental spaces are usually hard to come by, as family members pass these on to relatives. Papine market has nearly sixty stations. She pays a market fee weekly and taxes on the ground provisions she brings to market. She likes setting her own prices and being her own boss. The money she makes, she says, "really help[s] me with the kids."

Since meeting her in 1993, I have bought produce from Miss J. whenever I am in Jamaica. When I returned in 1995, she introduced me to her daughter, Miss E., who began to take over her business when Miss J. fell

ill. Starting in 1995, the daughter began to accompany Miss J. to the market several times a week. Miss J. tends to customers while her daughter takes care of the money. Unlike her mother, who calculates in her head, Miss E. uses her calculator. Her daughter has completed both her primary and secondary education. Now in her early twenties, she is currently at a professional school learning a trade (accounting). She will inevitably replace Miss J., as the family depends on this income for subsistence, to finance the children's education, and for other expenses.<sup>21</sup> More importantly, eventually, she will inherit her mother's business as well as the stall at Papine market.

The empirical studies cited above, as well as my own research, confirm some of these earlier findings. In addition, these studies focused on the role of social networks in higglering, and I will discuss this important issue in greater detail in chapter 6. In the late 1950s, Katzin observed that higglers spend a great deal of time maintaining contact with customers. "Customer" is used here to refer to anyone she trades with, from the farmer trader to the servant or the lady who purchases her produce at the market. The actual business transaction lasts a short while; the rest of the time is spent adhering to local social expectations of politeness. Katzin describes such an encounter: "her supplier came to the gate... they chatted while the supplier selected and reaped the vegetables. Miss A. always kept her suppliers informed about the latest news in her own neighborhood and in Kingston. Her progress was slow because she stopped at the yard of everyone who had ever sold to her, even though she knew that some of them had nothing to offer at the moment, for she wanted to remind them that she would buy from them whenever they did have anything. Along the way she stopped to greet and chat with everyone she met" (1959:424-25).

Katzin found that higglering depends on a series of social networks in part because both higglers and consumers are dispensable. Indeed, there is always someone else to buy from or sell to. This is one of the reasons that customers often form bonds with the particular vendors they buy from consistently. Two decades later, Durant-Gonzalez's work would reconfirm Katzin's point. She maintained that the custom between traders and consumers is "You buy from me and I sell to you" or "You didn't buy from me, I won't sell to you" (1985:197). So buyers and sellers work to maintain the ties that assure their symbiotic economic activities. Among the newer traders, these social ties are particularly fragile. As I discuss in the next chapter, these loose bonds are also the result of a saturated market, which has radically increased competition.

Since the 1970s, higglering, within the Greater Kingston Metropolitan area, has become an even more specialized occupation (Le Franc 1989). Not only have several different types of traders disappeared and new ones emerged, but also the scale of business and type of activity have changed considerably among different groups of local vendors. During the 1980s Elsie Le Franc created her own list.<sup>22</sup> She notes that the more traditional higglers, that is, the farmer-vendors and farmer higglers, are a declining minority, while town higglers are increasing. Nonetheless, higglers in markets are still largely rural based, though fewer are involved in actual farming activities (1989:104). Now, these traders acquire their goods from farmer higglers, as illustrated in the profile of Miss J., or from wholesalers of imported goods on the Kingston wharf. The disappearance of the more conventional higgler is the result of several factors including a decline in agricultural production and a generational shift away from farming.<sup>23</sup> As I discuss later, these changes were exacerbated by interdependent global and local socioeconomic and political trends. Indeed, the most substantial change that occurred in this occupation in the latter part of the twentieth century was the emergence of international higglering. The increased growth of this branch of the trade and the hypervisibility of its practitioners eventually resulted in state regulation. It is undisputed that the PNP's attempt at socioeconomic decolonization, the global energy crisis of the 1970s, and local responses to these events intersected to give rise to this new group of independent international traders.

### Politics of Change: Enter the Suitcase Trader

Globally, the 1970s were a turbulent time. In the aftermath of the Yom Kippur War (1973), OPEC overtly exercised its control over the price of oil to shock the industrialized West into recognizing its power. The embargo had lasting socioeconomic ramifications throughout the world. The Caribbean region was no exception. At this time, Jamaica was a relatively young nation, having gained its independence from Britain in 1962. During the early 1970s, the local economy reflected the impact of two decades of sustained growth. Jamaica had entered the bauxite market in the 1950s and soon became the world's leading exporter of this mineral. In addition, tourism was booming, though the industry was mostly foreign owned. With both incentives and support from the state, a local manufacturing sector developed (furniture, footwear, metal products,

food, chemicals, and garments) that was heavily dependent on imported raw materials. Similarly, consumption patterns were mostly import based (Stone 1980:27). It was during this period of industrialization that Jamaica's trading patterns shifted from a British to a United States market.<sup>24</sup> The economy grew steadily between 1950 and 1962 at an average annual rate of 7.5 percent; from 1962 to 1968 by 5.1 percent; and from 1968 to 1973 by 6.1 percent (Levitt 1991:11). Postindependence Jamaica was experiencing a period of consistent growth. However, those who profited from the growth were the old plantocracy and the new elite.

With this rapid economic expansion came simultaneous shifts in the socioeconomic structure that only increased the economic disparity among the various strata of the population. Before independence, the social structure and labor force were rigidly coded by race, with few exceptions. British whites, local whites, or other persons with light complexions usually held top administrative and managerial positions within the private sector and government (Edie 1991, Henriques [1953] 1968, Nettleford 1972). Disenfranchised browns and blacks were dissatisfied with this order. Thus, one of the motives behind the state's movement towards industrialization was to establish national (local upper-class) ownership of industries (Edie 1991:39). With this project, new work opportunities in industry emerged along with a growing civil service and politics that facilitated the social mobility of browns and blacks. Now blacks had access to the ladder of mobility. Many among them had been educated in Britain as part of the first wave of migration to the metropole. As domestic spaces opened up for managers and administrators, they had the social and cultural capital to assume these positions.

Simultaneously, between 1962 and 1972, unemployment continued to rise from 12 percent to 24 percent. For youths and females, unemployment was well over 30 percent.<sup>25</sup> Modernization meant expansion of the bauxite industry, which eroded farming and forced rural residents to migrate to Kingston. These rural migrants were unable to find work in the capital city and became part of the surplus population of unemployed or underemployed who found opportunity in the informal sector.<sup>26</sup> The impoverished, dire conditions of population density and other socioeconomic factors generated what several scholars characterize as the ghettoization of certain parts of Kingston. In contrast, middle- and upper-class living standards flourished. As a result of this disparity, and the tensions between downtown ghetto dwellers and uptown suburbanites in Kingston, the crime and violence fueled by poverty became endemic. But the

exaggerated economic disparity also gave rise to new forms of livelihood based on various degrees of hustling (from the petty to the fatal). This form of survival became a socioeconomic way of life, soon politicized, and constantly influenced the current racial/class/spatial order of Kingston. Within these confinements, alternative lifestyles emerged concomitant with subcultures in the downtown areas. Many aspects of these alternate lifestyles and subcultures revolved around what Jamaican economist Michael Witter (1977) calls a "hustling economy," including informal and sometimes illegal economic activities.<sup>27</sup> As life conditions worsened and crime rates rose, the opposition party (the People's National Party) diverged radically from the ruling party, the Jamaica Labour Party (JLP) and turned its focus away from economic growth and toward alleviation of the mass poverty and uplifting of the nation.

In 1972, the PNP came to power promising deliverance to the suffering black masses under the slogans of "Better Must Come" and "Power for the People." When it took office, the PNP government, led by Michael Manley, started redressing the socioeconomic imbalances caused by Jamaica's history as a dependent capitalist nation. There were several components to the PNP's plan. First, the party designed an anti-imperialist domestic policy independent of foreign control and responsive to the local majority. Second, the PNP plan promoted egalitarianism by expanding the number of opportunities available to the masses. Third, the approach was democratic socialist aimed at enhancing mass participation by changing the relationship between the state and its people. Finally, the policy celebrated Jamaica's African roots by promoting popular rediscovery of, and reinforcement of, black pride (Manley 1982:39).

The PNP's domestic policies included establishing a minimum wage and taking control of the import and export of goods and the outflow of income.<sup>28</sup> While these policies and programs were being implemented, the PNP introduced a number of "people programmes" and significant social reforms focusing on education, economic empowerment, and housing and land leasing that targeted benefits to youths, the landless, the rural poor, and others. Eventually, in 1974, the PNP was compelled to articulate a democratic socialist ideology. The government attempted to nationalize or "Jamaicanize" the economy; it also challenged the colonial system of local consumption patterns, which was highly dependent on imports (Stephens and Stephens 1986). Manley called on the people, especially the middle and upper classes, to curb what he referred to as their "felt needs" for foreign goods and to learn to appreciate local food

and clothing to promote expansion of local production. To reinforce trade restrictions, the party eventually established a list of banned goods<sup>29</sup> that could not be imported to the island.

Manley and the PNP also began to advocate women's rights. Though females were not initially identified as a special interest group by the PNP, by 1973 the party had become increasingly committed to gender-specific issues.<sup>30</sup> Until then, there had been no legislation specific to females. The PNP addressed gender inequity in its policies by establishing a Women's Bureau, although it remained peripheral to the central administration.<sup>31</sup> This bureau became quite active in 1975, when it was transferred to the Prime Minister's Office and generated a number of gender-sensitive legislative initiatives and social programs even before the United Nations declaration of the Decade for Women (1975–1985). These initiatives included women's crisis centers and a Special Employment Program (SEP) of which women were the major beneficiaries. In addition, day care centers facilitated women's entry into the labor force, and the poor received both free uniforms for primary school students as well as meals from the School Feeding Programme. All socioeconomic classes benefited from free secondary and university education. Before these reforms, employers could dismiss workers without compensation. As a result of PNP policy, however, this was no longer permitted. The Equal Pay Act, the Status of Children Act, the National Minimum Wage Act, and the Social Security Programme Act, passed between 1973 and 1976, were attempts to alleviate the socioeconomic hardships of the lowest classes.<sup>32</sup>

These programs, while necessary to achieve socioeconomic equity and a just society, only drained national budgets. According to Norman Girvan, by 1976, the economy was under siege. "The Balance on service payments deteriorated (collapse of tourism), net transfers fell, official capital inflow fell and private capital flows turned negative as capital flight took place. The Bank of Jamaica lost \$238 M in reserve funds and basically ran out of foreign exchange. On the fiscal side . . . expenditure ballooned while revenue stayed flat in an election year marked by political violence, disinvestment and capital flight" (1998:4). Nonetheless, in December 1976, the PNP was reelected by a wide margin. Its fierce anti-imperialist campaign, echoing the spirit of resistance coming from other third world nations, was best articulated in Manley's famous "we are not for sale, we know where we are going" speech. In this defiant address, the prime minister eloquently expressed the frustration fermenting in third world nations all over the globe. He gave voice to a people's exasperation as a so-called

postcolonial nation incarcerated by the continuities of neocolonialism. These were manifested in binding socioeconomic relations that uphold the divide between Western superpowers and the rest of the world. In taking this very public stand, the PNP was determined to take a third path.

In its insolent critique of neocolonialism, every topic was discussed. The PNP administration even addressed the issue of appearance as it considered dress as a form of resistance to imperialism. The party adopted various Rastafari dress codes that further enlisted support from the masses (Waters 1985). Manley himself pointed to the colonizing aspects of the three-piece suit, which is the preferred form of professional dress for Caribbean officials and dignitaries. He advocated the use of Kareba suits and the Cuban guayabera shirt (known in Jamaica as a bush jacket) instead. The prime minister's appeal for a decolonized mode of dress on the island deserves to be quoted at length:

If you live in a tropical country that has acquired the jacket and tie as a style of dress that is not suited to your climate, you have made a number of unconscious concessions. First of all you own a style of dress, which is not suited to your climate. This is the first act of psychological surrender since common sense should dictate that the style of dress should reflect the reality of the physical environment. Further the fact that you did not question the relevance of another man's style of dress to your physical environment is a confession of a paralysis of judgment. Third, where the style of dress is inherently expensive, you have placed a strain upon the ability of your society to create external symbols of egalitarianism. Fourth, where the style of dress has become associated with the status symbols of class and the escape from economic reality through white collar syndrome, you have inhibited your own ability to identify reality and placed yet another psychological obstacle in the path of a realistic pursuit of your own social and economic possibilities. (Manley 1974:66)

Manley's multilevel analysis points to the broad and in-depth aspects of the aim of the PNP's project. I return to this in the last chapter.

With this new emphasis on socialism and anti-imperialism, the PNP formed a new friendship with Cuba. The alignment with Cuba, coupled with the implementation of socialist-oriented policies, led the U.S. and the international community to ostracize Jamaica. More local turmoil ensued. Multinational corporations, factories, and garment firms left Jamaica for even cheaper labor in countries such as Mexico and Haiti.<sup>33</sup>

Manley's socialist initiative not only alienated the U.S. and countries under its influence, but also caused mass migration of the local merchant class and professionals, who had easier access to foreign visas. They were conflicted about this new Jamaica, and many felt they did/could not belong. Thus, the island suffered massive capital flight and reduced levels of foreign investments.<sup>34</sup>

By this time, the global economy was in grave recession. In Jamaica, inflation soared as unemployment rose. According to economist Kari Polanyi Levitt, "The two oil shocks, the reaction of the private sector (local and foreign) to the PNP's socialist rhetoric and the realities of redistribution populist policies" had ramifications (Levitt 1991:18); six months later, as bauxite companies continued to cut back on production, the PNP's attempt to secure greater "Jamaicanization" of the economy slowly led the country directly into the arms of the IMF. The conditions of Structural Adjustment Loans (SALs) were contradictory to the PNP's socialist ideology and undermined the party's earlier attempts at reforms. Jamaica failed its performance test six months after the first agreement was signed. To gain eligibility for additional foreign loans, drastic economic readjustments were required. A 37.5 percent devaluation of the local currency was mandated, price controls—which had alleviated the effect of inflation on the very poor—were lifted, wage ceilings were imposed, and indirect taxes resulted in rising inflation and real wage decline. The PNP government could barely keep up with these IMF-imposed restrictions. Government expenditures increased slightly while revenue plunged due to declines in tourism, sugar, and bauxite earnings (Stephens and Stephens 1986:111). Within three years, Jamaica failed three more IMF performance tests. More adjustments were demanded. The economy failed to respond to these measures and continued to decline (Levitt 1991:24). Since the government had rejected IMF mandates such as devaluation, removal of restrictions on foreign trade, and economic liberalization, in 1979, the IMF suspended its agreement with Jamaica. Indeed, as many have argued, international lending agencies' development efforts are not designed to benefit the receiving country; rather, these are primarily focused on recirculation of the borrowed capital (Escobar 1995).

Prior to the oil crisis and Manley's social democratic policies, employment had been less than scarce for females.<sup>35</sup> As businesses and shops closed, manufacturing companies fled and female unemployment rose. Sweatshop employees lost their jobs; most of them, uneducated and without other marketable skills, turned to foreign higglering.<sup>36</sup> Poor urban

females felt the impact of the structural adjustment programs. As their need for income intensified, self-employment was seen as the only survival strategy; it was the only social welfare net. The PNP's restriction on imports and the collapse of local industries had resulted in severe shortages. These shortages were exacerbated by the practice of removing merchandise from shelves and waiting for price increases before putting the items out again. In other cases, customers could purchase certain goods only in tandem with another less popular item, a practice referred to as "marrying goods." As there was an open market for foreign goods, unemployed females, many already active in independent trading, responded to consumer demands. Jamaica became an international provision ground as higglers exported produce such as thyme, scallions, june plums, and guineps, primarily to Cayman and Panama, where they sold these to earn foreign exchange. With this currency they purchased foodstuffs, like cereal and canned goods, or such articles as bric-a-brac, dry goods, and haberdashery. They imported these items to Jamaica, supplying consumers with items that were gone from the shelves of local stores and shops (Reid 1989:40). The flights to Cayman became known as "onion runs" because foreign higglers would import large amounts of this vegetable from the island (Taylor 1988:2). Among the items exported were manufactured goods such as T-shirts, reggae music tapes, rum, and Jamaican foods like water crackers, ackee, and Jamaican cheese. In turn, they imported household items, and eventually clothing and footwear, as well as status symbols like small appliances into Jamaica.

The foreign higglers identified, and traveled to, accessible destinations where there was demand for Jamaican products and the merchandise they sought was cheapest. Cayman was chosen as no visa was required and the airfare was relatively inexpensive. Visas for Curacao and Panama were not difficult to obtain, and purchases in Panama were duty free because of the free trade zone. There, they purchased clothing, shoes, cosmetics, and some household appliances. Haiti was a starting point, a trial run, especially for new recruits who traveled in groups and tested their skills (McFarlane-Gregory and Ruddock-Kelly 1993:3). In countries where they did not speak the language, they employed an interpreter who met them upon arrival and negotiated their prices. This individual often received an additional cut from business owners at the end of the day. Flights to their countries of destination throughout the region, were full of traders on their import-export missions. As their numbers grew rapidly, the sidewalks surrounding the main shopping areas downtown

were loaded with the scarce goods that had disappeared from shops and supermarkets. In many instances, foreign higgler boldly squatted at the door of these nearly empty stores to sell their wares. In other cases, established businesses bought from these higgler and/or even sponsored their trips to replenish their stock.

To sell their goods, these traveling higgler surged uptown to more affluent areas "to set up makeshift display and storage stalls in the shopping plazas... [that] became known as 'bend down' plazas, a reference to the fact that customers must bend down to examine the goods for sale" (Taylor 1988:3). While the established business sector cried out and the upper classes (of civil society) expressed their anxieties and annoyance at the streets being blocked, the PNP government (looked on and) ignored these activities. Indeed, it was in no position to address this group of entrepreneurs who exemplified the PNP's self-reliance dictum. Foreign higgler were breaking the law that stipulated an annual J\$500.00 limit on importing goods for personal consumption. According to Alicia Taylor, the PNP's disregard of the expansion of foreign higglering was likely to incur the wrath of its vocal lower-class supporters (1988:3). However, it must be noted that these traders' activities simultaneously contradicted and promoted the PNP's commitment to national self-reliance and economic independence, outlined in its Emergency Production Plan (EPP).<sup>37</sup> The entrepreneurial spirit of the foreign higgler was synonymous with the ruling party's aim, yet the independence they achieved required them to promulgate one of the most crippling legacies of colonialism, an import-based economy.

As the state passively looked on, this activity became more popular and salient. Teachers, insurance agents, managers, and others took personal flights abroad to purchase items they would retail back home in Jamaica. The pervasiveness and continuity of foreign higglering at this time is due to a series of historical factors. Marketing activities had been institutionalized in Jamaican everyday life; they involved mass populations, which the state could not service, and, as in the past, these new traders also provided products and a service to others that maintained social stability. Nonetheless, considering the extent and scale of the business, the more established business community became increasingly aggravated. Foreign higglering, like the provision ground system, which provided a temporary truce between slave and planter during slavery, aided the government. Suitcase trading, in a sense, replaced the government's social welfare system at a time of massive economic and social crisis. As the standard of

living reached a level nearly 45 percent lower than during the 1970s, the established business community roared as foreign higgler became their fierce competitors. In response to these demands, the PNP did what governments often do; it appointed a committee to research the problem.

### Neoliberalism: Regulating the Trade

As a result of trade deficits, Jamaica was near bankruptcy. With the economy in a slump, a third of the population out of work, and tense social conditions, Manley called elections a year ahead of schedule. While the PNP offered the nation a "non-IMF path," the opposition party—the JLP—promised "deliverance" and "equal rights and justice." The 1980 election was one of the bloodiest in Jamaica's history, with a politically motivated death toll between 980 and 1,000 (Stephens and Stephens 1986, Gaunst 1995). The JLP won the election by a landslide by pledging to steer the economy away from its previous "communist" path. It planned to achieve this through privatization, by liberalizing the economy, and by deregulating the export industry.

The new prime minister, Edward Seaga, called on the United States to assist Jamaica. In response, the U.S. proposed a recovery program in the Caribbean Basin Initiative (CBI)<sup>38</sup> and loans from international agencies. In 1981, the new government turned to the IMF, which recommended the country reduce its public spending, increase exports, deregulate foreign production, privatize state enterprises, and assess additional taxation. The government complied. However, despite drastic attempts to attract, and to appease the fear of, potential foreign donors, Jamaica could not entice these corporations to return; their attention was already focused elsewhere.

In 1983, the country failed yet another IMF test, but it had been granted other multilateral and bilateral loans from the World Bank, the IDB, and USAID with minimal conditions and even shorter strings attached. Economist Kari Levitt notes: "import controls were lifted and there was a surge of consumer goods and raw material imports, creating an artificial import-led, debt-fed expansion" (Levitt 1991:14). Local manufacturing declined as foreign higglering continued to boom. For example, footwear production dropped by 75.5 percent between 1976 and 1985. Garment manufacturing also decreased by 1987; there were less than 20 factories operating compared to 127 a decade before. The established business community continued to protest, demanding state control of foreign

higglering. The political and economic power of this group, joined with other factors, such as international monetary loan conditions and local concern with street congestion, spurred the JLP to react.

Seaga, also the minister of finance and planning at the time, was proactive. He took a measure to the House of Representatives, asking that a no-funds import license be issued to foreign higglering. With a no-funds license, ICIs could not obtain foreign exchange from banks. This license, which was purported to remove obstacles that traders faced when importing their goods (the state-related logistics of moving goods), proved to be another challenge. These licenses differed from those allocated to established formal businesses, which required them to pay to import goods for commercial purposes and gave licensees automatic access to foreign currency at formal institutions. In December 1981, the government issued this licensing system, prepared by the Revenue Board. It was to take effect the following year. The goal was to register all foreign higglering alphabetically throughout the island by the end of December 1982. To obtain this license, traveling higglering had to present a passport, a registration certificate or letter of advice issued by the Revenue Board the previous year, customs duty receipts or import duties as determined from records of the Collector General, and an income tax reference number. Also, all back taxes on earlier importing activities had to be paid. The formalization process had begun.

As the Minister of Industry and Commerce, the Honorable Douglas Vaz, stressed (see epigraph to this chapter), foreign higglering was taking a serious toll on the business sector. Local manufacturing and commercial industries had never faced such fierce competition. Something had to be done. The licensing system went into effect on February 22, 1982. Any ICI who traveled after that date was expected to be licensed and to follow the new procedure to clear imports through customs. Imports had to be packed in locked containers that would be held at the Queen's Warehouse (of the Norman Manley International Airport) pending clearance. Duties would be assessed and, with proper documents, ICIs could collect their goods. Those who failed to follow these rules would be fined three times the value of their merchandise.

In November 1982, the State Revenue Board bestowed the official title of Informal Commercial Importer (ICI) on foreign higglering. The year 1983 marks the point when state regulation of foreign higglering began to be both consistently and aggressively enforced. Upon the arrival of ICIs at both airports, customs officers confiscated imports and held them until

the importers paid the duties charged. The government also began to crack down on the trade by enlisting the police to seize vendors' merchandise and to remove them from the streets and storefronts. The Ministry of Local Government delegated this problem to the Urban Development Center, which oversees parks and markets throughout the island. Their primary concern was to satisfy all parties (established merchants, civil society, and the ICIs) and to relocate the growing number of ICIs. Their solution was to build an arcade especially for traders who congested Kingston streets. "Cities are mobile places and places of mobility" (Sheller and Urry 2006a:1), and ICIs interrupted downtown Kingston's metabolic flow. They were seen as impediments that arrested traffic, the transportation system, and the general stream of street activities. Their "unsightly" piles and makeshift stalls disordered the city's landscape, and the government maintained that consistent action would be taken to organize their activities in an orderly fashion.

Soon after, the government announced another measure. ICIs would now have legal access to an annual quota of foreign exchange. This was in response to vendors' complaints that they were restricted as smaller businesspersons. When the program was announced, it was documented in the *Gleaner* that ICIs under this new system would be able to secure funds at the parallel market rate from the commercial banks to make purchases (*Gleaner* 1983a). At this time, foreign currency was difficult to obtain. Noncommercial access to foreign exchange was limited to J\$50 per individual annually at a rate of exchange of J\$1.78 Jamaican dollar per US\$1.

In addition, import quotas were introduced and assigned only to licensed ICIs by the Revenue Board. These had a monetary value of US \$1,000–5,000 and permitted ICIs to import specific merchandise for an initial period of six months; this was the amount that an ICI could receive in foreign exchange for the entire year. The following is a list of permitted items issued by the trade administrator: burglar alarms, buttons, studs, press fasteners, balloons, cereals, cornflakes, Christmas tree decorations, cutlery, cameras, clocks, flowers (artificial), flashlights, fabric upholstery, footwear for children and women except sandals, hooks and eyes, hair clippers, hair dryers, laundry blue soap, lace edgings, lamp wicks, lawnmowers, locks and keys, mechanical lighters, manicure sets, vehicle parts (except brakes, filters, clutches, and radiators), nipples for bottles, needles, pins, pens (except ball point), pencils, powder puffs, radio receivers, citizen's band radios (license required from postmaster general), razors, steel wool, sporting equipment, scissors (tailors, dressmakers,



others), sequins, tulle (lace), table glassware, umbrellas, wigs, and clothing accessories.<sup>39</sup> At the end of the six-month period, each ICI's case would be reviewed and new quotas would be issued. The total amount allotted to individuals was based on past records of importing, that is, on the duty paid by the ICIs over a period of time.

While this new licensing system offered some benefits for traders, there were just as many restrictions and hindrances. Needless to say, when the licensing deadline arrived (December 1982), only 1,768 vendors had registered on the island. This number was lower than the number of participants selling goods on streets throughout the Greater Kingston Metropolitan area and in other parishes in the country. Traders were rightly wary. The government had identified and was now focused on them as a new source of revenue. In the process, their business activities were being severely curtailed. The foreign exchange and import quotas, as well as the list of allowable import items, infringed upon ICIs' versatile buying practices and had the potential to undermine their markets. When ICIs began to import in the 1970s, it was in direct response to market demand. This new regulation sought to limit ICIs' ability to go through the existing cracks and threatened to crush their businesses.

As with most issues in Jamaica, this battle occurred in the public media, such as talk radio and newspapers. Newspaper columnists such as Carl Stone, Dawn Ritch, and Carl Wint took stands for or against this activity, which they viewed as a necessary strategy of the poor, a public nuisance, and a parasitic practice that disrupted the local socioeconomic order. *Gleaner* columnist Jennifer Ffrench's editorial on this issue, titled "Frustrating the Higgler," exposed the class conflict underlying this debate. She deserves to be quoted at length:

If anyone had any doubts about the Government's policy towards higglers, now christened "Informal Commercial Importers" (ICIs) these should have been put to rest by what took place last week. When the Revenue Board can issue quotas for goods valued as low as \$1000 for six months and on top of that eliminate many of the quick for profit items which the higglers used to sell, one must wonder if the intention is not, at first, to frustrate them and then force them out of business. Three weeks ago Industry and Commerce Minister indicated at a press briefing that the Government was "formalizing higglers", but little did anyone, in particular the higgler, suspect that this formalisation would be tantamount to virtually phasing them out of the system, which is where things seem to be heading. Whoever heard of higglers selling cameras and lawnmowers, not

to mention motor vehicle parts and citizen band radios? These are some of the items listed for their quotas, while ladies sandals and garments, which comprise a large part of the current sales of higglers have been excluded from the list of 48 items, which they are being allowed to import. (Ffrench 1983)

Her analysis detailed the impact that government regulation would have on this activity and its participants. She pointed to the impractical list of items vendors were now legally allowed to import, noting that the size of vendor stalls in the newly built arcade could not accommodate most of these. She concluded her piece by stating that the government must find another way to ensure that they balance their responses to demands from various interest groups in the society so that "everyone gets a chance to live. When all is said and done, the higglers certainly deserve that chance." This was a direct reference to the government's preferential treatment of big business. Then Ffrench asked the ultimate question: was the government's real intention to force ICIs out of the importing business?

Indeed, numerous vendors complained to their organizations that the process was hindering them from expanding and in some cases continuing their activities. They felt that they were being penalized for their previous informal importing activities. Records of the United Vendors Association document the experiences of several foreign higglers who explained how they were literally trapped into paying back taxes. According to these individuals, during their visits to the Collector General to obtain the recommendation letter, they were lured into conversation about their work in the trade. At the end of the conversation, they were told they owed a certain amount in revenue on the basis of their past activities. Most vendors stated they could not afford this. The UVA noted that only vendors with enough capital could pay their back duty in order to gain the legal license and remain in the business. The only option for others was to continue to operate illegally; some 40 percent of the ICIs in a 1990 sample were unregistered (Abbensetts 1990).

This new registration and licensing system was limiting, as it was intended to be. According to Seaga, those who had not paid past import duties were not eligible for the import license. Indeed, not all of the traveling higglers could register since they could not meet all the requirements of the law. This created more distinctions between traders who could afford to register and those who could not and therefore operated outside of the legal system. The government claimed this system would safeguard the activities of traders, as "goods will no longer be seized provided the

imports are within the limits of the quota and do not include restricted items" (Revenue Board commissioner Canute Miller, quoted in *Gleaner* 1983b).

ICIs had found advocates among members of the Chamber of Commerce and intellectuals at the University of the West Indies, Mona campus. Their voices coupled with the outcry and mobilization of their organizations and ICIs' civil disobedience protests resulted in a small victory for traders. On June 21, 1983, the Ministry of Industry and Commerce announced it would no longer be issuing import quotas.

In September 1983, the first arcade built especially to accommodate the removal of dry goods vendors from the streets opened its doors. This arcade provided space for 580 ICIs. The *Star*, the *Gleaner's* evening edition, actually referred to these stalls as chicken coops. The government promised to build more arcades. In addition, mini-markets would also be built for food vendors who had taken to the streets along with ICIs. Makeshift food markets of shacks and stalls had sprung up all over the city. The minister of local government, Alva Ross, declared that he would clean up the area and bring this practice under control. The JLP administration remained persistent in achieving this goal. Early in 1984, the government declared that additional duties on imported goods would be imposed. In 1985, Metropolitan Parks and Markets, a subsidiary of the Urban Development Center, was created and directed by the Ministry of Local Government. The purpose of this agency was to monitor street vending and manage existing markets and the new arcades designated for ICIs. In 1986, the Constant Spring Arcade was built and provided spaces for 300 uptown traders. That same year, arsonists burned the first arcade. It was rebuilt in 1987 and renamed the Parnell Charles arcade. Later that same year, an income tax number and national insurance number were required to obtain the newly issued business enterprise number (BENO). The activities of ICIs were being severely limited.<sup>40</sup> In the years that followed, more restrictions and policies were instituted, forcing traders to confront the state in innovative ways.

By the end of the JLP's second term in 1989, informal commercial importing had been as fully integrated into the economy as such activities can be. The management of informal economies is just another component of neoliberal globalization; it is necessary to pave the way for international funding institutions (Dupuy 2006). While on the one hand governments profess the well-meaning intent of their policies, on the other hand their actual effects only further impinge upon and constrict the lives of the poor,

resulting in greater socioeconomic instability. According to economist James Bovard (1987), throughout the JLP's tenure in Parliament, the prime minister preached free enterprise, in accordance with international standards, while his government pursued rigorous interventions that increased state control of the Jamaican economy. From 1980 onwards, the government bought an oil refinery, hotels, and an aluminum melting plant, and created numerous state farms. The administration also interfered in various sectors of the economy and raised taxes to their highest level ever. One of these new taxes was a J\$25,000 fee for the issuance of a shop operator's license and a shop operator agency permit. Bovard characterizes this period in Jamaica's history as yet another failed attempt at state-directed economic development. More specifically, Bovard emphasized the impact some of these measures had on the creation of small businesses, which he argued create far more new jobs than their large competitors (1987). Indeed, according to Stephens and Stephens, from both social and political perspectives, employment was the most crucial failure of this administration. More specifically, they note:

In his 1981 budget speech, Seaga proclaimed his goal of creating 100,000 jobs over a period of three years. . . . However, after a decline from an annual average level of 27.3 per cent in 1980 to 25.9 per cent in 1981, unemployment increased again to an average of 27.4 per cent in 1982. In October 1982, unemployment stood at 27.9 per cent of the labor force, the second highest level ever recorded in Jamaica. In addition, under-employment grew as the percentage of employed people who worked less than 33 hours a week increased from 14.9 per cent in October 1980 to 19.4 per cent in October 1981 and 21.4 per cent in October 1982. (1986:262)

For the business of informal commercial importing, the unemployment crisis meant a flood of new recruits from across the social structure, especially from the middle class. Despite consistent government regulation, the trade served as a buffer against the realities of inflation. Importing allowed newcomers to "make a life" or "make do."<sup>41</sup> As I elaborate in the next chapter, policies affect traders unevenly. Middle- and upper-class traders who import informally often went unnoticed, while stereotyped lower-class ICIs were hypervisible. Inevitably, with increasing and continuous policies toward state regulation, ICIs' confrontations with government escalated. Traders needed official representation rather than ad hoc allies to address these restricting measures.

### Traders Organize: United Vendors Association

The UVA was established at the end of PNP laissez-faire administrative policies toward foreign higgler and the commencement of the JLP's formalization process. According to UVA records:

This association, which represents all categories of vendors (not just ICIs) was founded in the year 1979 in the midst of severe pressure from the businesses community (traditional) who continually attacked vendors on the basis of selling illegal goods of which they had no proof. This forced government to launch a campaign to remove vendors from the streets. The reasons given were that vendors were blocking the sidewalks, and KSAC [Kingston St. Andrew Corporation] backed by the police was used to intimidate and harass vendors to remove them from the sidewalks. The vendors maintained that due to the grave unemployment situation, they had no other alternative but to continue to sell on the sidewalks as no provision was being made for alternative accommodation. Many stalls were destroyed by the KSAC on more than one occasion. It was during this crisis that some vendors along with Ras Historian came together and had their first meeting in the Park and the UVA was inaugurated. Between 1979-1981 vendors under the leadership of the UVA were able to restrain both past and present administrations from unilaterally removing vendors from the sidewalks without providing alternative accommodation, since vendors were alleviating a burden off the shoulders of the government by providing their own employment. (UVA 1986a)

Sixty-one vendors were present at the meeting where members settled on a name for the organization, We the People United Vendors Association. They also decided on a formal structure and held an election for officers. There was a clear gender division of labor within the organization, as male vendors were nominated and accepted top stations, while females were named to the remaining secretarial and treasurer positions. The UVA, as it became known, was quite specific about its main goal. According to then acting chair Brother Neville Smith, "We are trying to get ourselves together to stand up for a better life, as vendors" (UVA 1980:4:2). To achieve their aim, they came up with the following objectives:

- Protect the interest of vendors and defend their rights;
- Organise vendors into a united body;
- Promote mutual respect among vendors;

- Negotiate on behalf of vendors, with all relevant authorities in all matters affecting and/or concerning vendors;
- Explore more profitable markets locally and abroad; and
- Develop and organise vendors into one cooperative movement in the areas of exports and imports.

Knowing the character of local politics, they established a strict rule to further ensure that the organization would maintain a nonpartisan stance, declaring that "no member is allowed to use the platform of this association to support, attract, or sympathise with any political party or to act in, or make any speech on behalf or in a partisan political way" (UVA 1982:10:12). In addition, between 1982 and 1985, the UVA ran an extensive popular education campaign specifically to address issues of partisan politics within the organization. In the beginning, vendors were concerned that the organization become and remain legitimately recognized by government so that it could indeed intervene and negotiate with the state and other relevant organizations on their behalf. As the UVA became legal, the organization was in a position to formally represent traders and to respond to various policies. It played a particularly significant role on the question of relocating ICIs. During its first decade, the UVA was quite active. It met regularly with vendors and mediated meetings, and initiated relationships with state officials, business leaders, and established businesses that sought to aid this new group of entrepreneurs. Without an office, the organization held its meetings at the Kingston Parish Church on King Street or in Coke Hall on Parade and Church Street. Members took minutes and documented attendance, which was often greater during tense times. Every three years elections were held, and new officers took office, although the gender hierarchy more or less remained.

The UVA was the source of information dissemination for all vendors. It provided ICIs with letters to obtain foreign exchange; it corresponded with various ministries concerning policies; it was in contact with embassies and airlines in attempts to pave the way and remove some of the obstacles impeding ICIs from carrying out their activities. The organization sought to be more than just an advocate for vendors. It was active in the community as well, organizing social events and making donations to homes for children and the elderly as well as sponsoring shows in its efforts to "promote the socio-economic well being of all vendors and their families." To achieve its goal, the UVA took an unrelenting approach to engage with government on any issues concerning ICIs.

While this may have been its goal, it is evident that during the 1980s, the ruling JLP party consistently rebuffed the UVA as it attempted to formally represent the interests of ICIs. UVA minutes and records also document a series of unanswered letters to government ministries as well as officials who failed to show up for planned meetings. Officials showed little regard for UVA input on the occasions when they met and were at the table. Nonetheless, it was in part, the organization's persistence that led to the government's relocation of ICIs to arcades as opposed to the complete removal of vendors from the streets. These newly built structures, however, caused problems of their own (from leaking that caused damage to vendors' goods to unsanitary conditions and lack of security).<sup>42</sup> Also, in the UVA's attempts to keep its business activities nonpartisan, they objected to the arcade being named after a PNP official.

While the government marginalized the UVA, this organization was being pursued by a series of businesses (such as airlines, customs clearing houses, insurance companies, travel agencies and others) that stood to capitalize on the impending expansion of this industry. Also, Sameer Younis, the president of the Chamber of Commerce at that time, was an advocate who attempted to recognize and engage this group. These interactions highlight the contentious character of the relationship between ICIs and the government, as they emphasize ICIs' (and their representatives') lack of power vis-à-vis the state. Thus, they were often at the mercy of the state apparatus that constrained and in some ways determined their businesses.

### **Policies as Floating Signifiers**

Government policies concerning ICIs from that era are best viewed as what white French anthropologist Claude Levi-Strauss (1950) was the first to refer to as floating signifiers; that is, they have no meaning without context. Like race, which is not rooted in biology but is a social construct, these policies were sociolegal constructions. In many instances, they were not officially documented. As such, they were fluid and highly dependent on context, i.e., the government in power and the moment in time. Despite their multiple signification, however, it is imperative to note that these policies also had, and continue to have, both symbolic and material consequences. Materially, regulatory measures affect ICIs' economic decisions and their overall business potential. Their tax burden is very real

and impacts their daily lives. I discuss the symbolic effects below particularly in reference to how the term "informal" in their official title serves to permanently socially incarcerate them. Ministries and other government-operated offices will hardly admit to possessing policies, let alone allow access to physical documentation that is supposedly public information.

From 1992 to 2004, I sought tangible copies of policies in the same manner that I sought to conquer all aspects of my actual fieldwork processes, but to no avail. Every time I tried, the process was the same. I would call the ministries or government offices and proceed to ask for information on ICI-related policies. The person on the line would send me to someone else, who in turn would send me elsewhere, and so on. The same thing happened when I went to the offices. When I was lucky, I would be pointed to the information office and allowed access to the library. On file, there was a study or two conducted by consultants for the purpose of relocating street vendors or studying informal economies. Depending on the office, the latter were often listed, but not available, or researchers and officers still employed treated these as their private property<sup>43</sup> and regulated who received access to such information. I often found myself engaged in a scavenger hunt for documentation. The redundancy of this process over a decade of conducting this research made me realize that accessing the actual policies in many ways was insignificant. Rather, from a sociocultural point of view, the fact that they were difficult to obtain is more noteworthy. Policies, it seems, exist in a virtual world. This reinforces my claim about their inconsistency, in terms of both their existence and their application.

The capriciousness of government regarding policies has turned the media, especially print media, into the most reliable source of state-related documentation. Indeed, as is evident below, more information has been published in the *Gleaner* than is accessible from clerks at ministries. This lack of transparency, in a sense, allows for the signifier (in this case, the policies) to not only have multiple referents, but also, regardless of their discursive fluidity, to continue to have drastic impact on the lives of those they target and contact. It is for this reason that I propose that ICIs occupy a subcategory as flexible citizens, to use Aihwa Ong's term. Ong uses this term to refer to "the strategies and effects of mobile managers, technocrats, and professionals seeking to both circumvent and benefit from different nation-state regimes by selecting different sites for investments, work, and family relocation" (1999:112). In other words, it is a concept that refers "to the cultural logics of capitalist accumulation,

travel, and displacement that induce subjects to respond fluidly and opportunistically to changing political-economic conditions" (1999:6). I depart from Ong, however, and use her term to bring attention to the fluidity of ICIs' citizenship within their nation rather than as a transnational phenomenon. In doing so, my aim is to emphasize the fact that their status as Jamaican citizens is one that is in constant fluctuation. This is emblematic of their dialectic interactions with the state, which is more or less parasitic. Indeed, while they pay exorbitant taxes, unlike established businesspersons, they receive none of the recognition that comes with being incorporated into national fiscal policy. In that sense, they are not accorded full citizenship at home. This is possible because of the lack of transparency concerning policies, which allows the state (regardless of the party in power) to use the revenue collected from ICIs in multiple ways. As I show in the following chapter, policies may be fixed in their nonexistent discursive form, but their actual implementation is in fact quite the opposite. They are disproportionately applied to certain traders more than others, rendering the question of the informality of Informal Commercial Importers redundant.

### **An Official Paradox**

The term "informal commercial importing" has been something of a paradox since it was first uttered by government officials. It is, in part, for this reason that the Jamaica Chamber of Commerce took an interest in ICIs. After all, they were being incorporated into national policies and their activities contributed tremendously to the Jamaican economy. As the JLP administration sought to formalize traders, ICIs found advocates among several established members of the formal sector who admired them for their entrepreneurial spirit and untrained business savvy. With increasing outcry from traders and their advocates, on September 8, 1983, an article appeared in the *Gleaner* that sided with ICIs and pointed to the JLP's deliberate efforts to pressure these new entrepreneurs out of the trade (Erskine 1983:1). A day later, Jamaica House issued a two-page statement from Prime Minister Edward Seaga defending his policies and responding to the article. He declared that the purpose of the formalization of foreign higglers was to give them status as small businesspeople who no longer operated on the fringes of the economy. Seaga wrote, "An article appeared in Thursday's *Gleaner* titled 'Government's treatment of ICIs irks

Businessmen' which reveals a lack of up to date information on the subject which requires that I should repeat here information which has been made public from time to time on Government's policy with regard to professionalizing various types of activities in the small business sector." Seaga stressed, "The program of transforming certain types of higglering into a more professional operation in place of the often illegitimate, sometimes rowdy, and frequently disorganized activities which have been the pattern until recently, has been under my personal supervision as part of the overall policy of raising the level of recognition of small business activity" (1983:1). While the prime minister argued that this policy was designed to regulate an economic activity that was out of control, both his rhetoric and the government's subsequent actions clearly point to efforts to domesticate the unruly foreign higglers. Similar to attempts by masters and planters during slavery and its aftermath, the racial/spatial order was being demarcated to keep everyone in their place.

The prime minister recapitulated the conditions and cracks of the old system that higglers went through. Then he outlined the actual measures taken by his government to redress this situation. This is one of the most detailed official statements concerning policies on ICIs ever made public. I reprint most of it here. According to the prime minister,

under the former system, higglers:

- 1.) operated without licenses;
- 2.) imported goods, which were prohibited for which they were fined and the goods later released to them;
- 3.) practiced wide-scale under-valuing of imports;
- 4.) jammed the passenger arrival lounge at the airports with goods in large quantities, which should have been handled as freight;
- 5.) sold goods on the sidewalks in an unsightly and disorganised market place which scarred the face of the city with shacks and other undesirable structures.

After a period of re-organisation, the following measures were instituted which have considerably changed the pattern of operation of higglering. The measures included the designation of higglers as Informal Commercial Importers (ICIs) in keeping with their new status of operation as small business people working on a more orderly and business like basis:

- i.) An amount was earmarked for the issue of import quotas against which licenses are now issued to ICIs based on funds, which they obtain on the

parallel market. The quota determined on the basis of previous levels of trading as established by customs receipts, with a minimum amount for first time traders or those who did not have adequate records.

- ii.) Only goods which are normally importable can now be imported. Imports which are illegal can no longer be imported.
- iii.) All goods on arrival are placed in special iron containers at the airport designed for the purpose and having two locks. These containers are transferred to the Queen's warehouse in another section of the airport and another appointment given to the ICIs to attend and clear the containers which are then stripped by Customs just as in the case of goods arriving for imports by major importers, contrary to the views expressed in the article.
- iv.) This has minimized the under-invoicing of goods and has facilitated the correct levels of import duties. This has not been possible under the heavy pressure which customs officers had to endure while attempting to value and clear higgler imports along with normal passenger baggage under the previous disorderly system.
- v.) A tax is levied on each ICI based on the size of their quota issued and evidence of tax receipts must be tendered and taxes paid on previous sales, before new quotas are issued. There are no exceptions to this rule. Because quotas are based on levels of import duties, the temptation to under quote the value of goods to reduce the payment of import duties is also minimized.
- vi.) A more orderly system of sales has now been instituted for ICIs in place of the unsightly rag-tag system on the main streets in downtown Kingston by the erection of the new market place for their activity.
- vii.) The system is not yet working to the full extent desired but the results so far are very heartening and satisfying on all sides. As a consequence, these hard working persevering small traders are no longer operating on the fringe of the economy, and sometimes illegally, but have been given status, recognition and a rightful role as small business people capable of operating in a professional manner.

The prime minister concluded with a warning message to those in the formal sector siding with traders: "The lesson to be learned from this is that these small traders, who have had in the past to push and shove their way to deriving benefits and getting recognition, can now be much more *organised and disciplined*, then other elements of the business community should take note of their responsiveness in asking themselves the question whether they are as responsive to good order in the proper conduct of business affairs" (ibid. 16) (my italics).

As the JLP administration's policies were to professionalize small traders so they no longer operated on the "fringes of the economy", it is evident this plan was implemented rather successfully. This brings up a crucial question about the "informality" of the Informal Commercial Importer. It has been stated that "informal" is a reference to the fact that it began as an illegal activity. In 2004, the commissioner of customs noted, "The informality is because they are nomads of sorts, without a permanent establishment." This does not explain why this term continues to apply to traders who occupy stalls in an arcade, which gives them a fixed location.

However, from the 1980s onwards, ICIs have been slowly incorporated into national fiscal policies and are now fully integrated in the economy. Most traders I interviewed noted that the new title gave them respect, especially as it distinguished them from the higgler and made them into "professionals." I believe this label has also had some negative consequences for ICIs. It obscured the fact that "informal" traders remained stigmatized for the conditions that gave rise to the trade, especially given the fact that they were so heavily regulated. This term also obscures ICIs' contributions to the national economy and the broader market and social stability. The consequences of this marginality are explored in later chapters. First, it must be noted that the execution of policies was uneven and had a differential impact, especially on ICIs who fit the stereotype and were easily recognized. Thus, the government's regulation measures were exclusionary, as they applied only to visible ICIs, creating a bureaucratic abyss. This is just another example of capitalism's key concern, captured in the phrase "what the traffic will bear." Government heavily taxes a group of "flexible citizens" who have limited political power at the levels of policy making and implementation and virtually no representation.