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"Slackness": The Antithesis of Culture and its Place in Dancehall Music

by Racquel Fagon

A Jamaican's conception and experience of Jamaican popular culture are not solely subjected to the sociopolitical and cultural happenings of the past, but are unequivocally porous to present influences within the Caribbean and the world at large. Dancehall is a thriving offshoot of this cross-fertilization between history and the present. As Cooper (1995) states "The beginnings of ska--the precursor of rock-steady, reggae, and now dancehall—are located as much in the blues as in the indigenous Jamaican musical forms" (p. 1).

A controversial aspect of dancehall is slackness: "sexually explicit lyrics, performances, and dance routines that outrage the middle class and the older generation..." (Mordecai & Mordecai, 2001, p.151). The middle class and the older generation are the sustainers of the dominant Eurocentric culture. They maintain the traditions and conventions of colonialism and neo-colonialism that dictate most aspects of the Jamaican social structure in terms of gender roles and an individual's place and behavior in the public domain. These individuals give an ear-splitting crescendo to the voices who classify dancehall music as a "profoundly malicious cry to upset the existing social order....noises that pollute middle-class neighborhoods...[and] a threatening challenge to those uneasily awake in comfortable beds" (Cooper, 1995, p. 5).

A fundamental purpose of dancehall music is to escape "from the authority of the omniscient Culture [using] coded language..." (Cooper, 2004, p.141). This is achieved through the artistes' dexterity in "DJing" and creating lyrics as well as in designing, promoting, and marketing dance movements, body images and vernacular. Consequently, these aspects of the dancehall culture contain blatant and/or suggestive sexual references that are considered to be slackness by the "proper Culture." Slackness within dancehall music is an antithesis of this "Culture"; a Culture that is predominantly defined by Eurocentric conformities, guidelines, and rules. The need to cut the colonial umbilical cord has pushed the oppressed majority within the Jamaican society to

rebel against this dominant colonial chastisement, creating a "culture of slackness," through dancehall music that translates into the purveyors of the culture being as independent and expressive as their hearts' desire.

Dancehall has been the acclaimed music in Jamaica from the end of the twentieth century till now. It differs from the earlier genres of Jamaican popular music (ska, rock steady, reggae, and dub) in that it employs "digital technology for the creation of rhythms and in the multiplicity of rhythms used" (Mordecai & Mordecai, 2001, p. 150). Entire albums can have one singer or DJ, with the sound engineer utilizing his technological brass, or several singers or DJs laying down tracks on one album, using the same digital rhythm. In the industry these multifunctional rhythms are called rhythm tracks. While one DJ makes a hit tune (song) on a rhythm track, another DJ may use the same rhythm and not hit the mark. The engineers who produce these tracks usually:

...harness a variety of rhythms, from rock to techno to hip hop to Latin, [and lately more indigenous sounds, such as Arabic and Indian] and filter them through their Jamaican rhythmic sensibility, from mento to gospel to revival, and through a blend of real instrumentation (by themselves and others) and digital effects, to produce music that is uniquely theirs...The technical wizardry of Jamaican producers is widely acknowledged, as is their sophisticated use of rhythm. (Mordecai & Mordecai, 2001, pp.150-151)

However, one person's cultural "noise" is another's knowledge and experience. Ergo, dancehall is more than bass rhythms and assumably unintelligible words; it is a culture of "language, dress, 'style,' [and] worldview" (Mordecai & Mordecai, 2001, p.141). It is the voice of the Jamaican people evaluating, praising, and highlighting their indigenous identities, whether by disseminating Rastafarian ideologies, showcasing blatant sexual innuendoes in music and dance, or simply embracing their love for their simple, God-given rights to life. To recapture and reinstate their independence and control over their own culture, a new culture is begotten, an evolved, effervescent culture. Cooper (2004) argues that the "Jamaican dancehall culture is stubbornly rooted in a politics of place that claims a privileged space for the local and asserts the authority of the native as speaking subject" (Cooper, 2004, p. 2). Finally, the dancehall culture gives the locals autonomy over popular modes of entertainment, and an opportunity to institute new societal norms and/or injunctions.

The slackness within dancehall music is a genuine expression of an evolved indigenous culture that is geared towards incorporating the "massive" (masses or the working class population) to put "fire pon Rome," which is to eradicate the indoctrinated ideologies of marginalization, racism, and sexism, as a result of colonization. These are psychological and cultural barriers built to keep Africans and their descendants, who the colonizers thought to be unruly and unworthy people (there are those who still hold this view) in their place. Why should an independent and culturally emancipated society such as the Jamaican society, still follow the same toneless rhythm of its colonizers to this day? Can that society be seen as truly emancipated if it does? The response to this question will probably depend on the group with which an individual feels a greater sense of identity: the privileged minority or the underprivileged majority.

The dancehall culture is an avenue for emancipation from the dominant superstructures in society. Dancehall is the indigenous culture finding itself lost in a fog of commonness. The Oxford English Dictionary defines emancipation or the state of being emancipated as "[being free] from restrictions or conventions." Analyzing the fundamental purpose of the dancehall culture, as stated before, through the understanding of this definition (emancipation), clearly points to the fact that there is a pervasive misunderstanding of dancehall culture and specifically, its culture of slackness.

Cooper (2004) aptly puts it, when she argues:

. . . dancehall constitutes a discrete, if evidently not discrete culture . . . slackness, though often conceived and critiqued as an exclusively sexual and politically conservative discourse, can be much more permissively theorized as a radical, underground confrontation with the patriarchal gender ideology and the duplicitous morality of fundamentalist Jamaican society. (p.3)

One must consider that the dominant Jamaican culture has been established within the confines of European influences, which suggest that the only practices that are right and necessary are those of the colonizer, but the African derived customs fall outside of the boundaries of the dominant ideologies, and need to be marginalized. Dancehall culture, similar to Rastafarianism, creates a Mount Zion, a place of refuge from the dank, airless cells of this societal "zombification" and monotony.

It is a common misconception that the dominant features of the Jamaican popular culture are the revolutionary ideologies of the Rastafari and the institutionalization of the country's indigenous language, Jamaican Creole. However, with the dissemination of these ideas of "Jamaicanness," is the dissemination of the insiders' experience of Jamaican popular culture. These insiders have an umbilical attachment to the grassroots culture of the island, and they are the people who are usually classified as the oppressed, working class, or the displaced majority. They "struggle to articulate a coherent sense of identity in resistance to the destabilizing imperative of neocolonial social, economic, and political forces" (Cooper, 2004, p. 2). In other words, the insider needs to find a liberating space, in order to reclaim his or her cultural and ethnic individuality from the totalitarian ideals of neocolonialism.

This desire has opened the conversation on the role and place of gender and sexuality in the dancehall culture. Cooper (1995) further declares that the "transgressive woman is Slackness personified...[and] an analysis of the lyrics of the DJs completes the genealogical review" (p. 11). The transgressive woman from a Biblical standpoint is a woman who demoralizes herself to the point of redemption. Slackness becomes the transgressive woman; the dancehall culture is the controlling pimp that instructs her to solicit cultural appeasement by going against the institutionalized and accepted conventions of the respectable dominant culture. Cooper (1995) analyzes the idea of "transgression" within the context it is generally expressed:

. . . the metaphor of Slackness/Culture is used to investigate how the 'high/low' cultural divide that is endemic to Jamaican society is (re)produced in the hierarchical relations of gender and sexuality that pervade the dancehall. Though the denigration of 'slackness' seems to determine the concomitant denigration of female sexuality, this feminisation of slackness in the dancehall

can also be read in a radically different way as an innocently transgressive celebration of freedom from sin and law. Liberated from the repressive respectability of a conservative gender ideology of female property and propriety, these women lay claim to the control of their own bodies. (p. 11)

To provide a foundation for this analysis, it is necessary to state that a two-faced gender ideology is prevalent in the dominant Jamaican culture. The accepted and practiced conventions on gender are derived from Victorian England and Judeo-Christian theology, both active and influential proponents of the established gender-defining social structure in Jamaica. Although today, the pervasive Euro-American infiltration has created an ambivalence towards gender roles in the Jamaican society. The traditional ideologies of the woman being the reincarnation of virtuous Mary, Mother of God, and the man being as uncensored as his chooses are still concepts practiced and adhered to.

Deconstructing the meaning of "slackness," according to the Jamaican usage, versus the definition of "slack," according to the Dictionary of Jamaican English is necessary in understanding the essentials of the cultural disparity towards the dancehall culture. The Jamaican usage of the word "slackness" is synonymous in meaning to "licentiousness," which according to the Oxford English Dictionary means: "...unchecked by morality, especially in sexual matters." Cooper (2004) gives a more insider-based explanation of slackness as: "feminized, seductive slackness simultaneously resisting and enticing respectable culture" (p. 2).

The Dictionary of Jamaican English does not have a definition of the word "slackness," but there is a definition for the word "slack." which is: "a woman of loose morals." Cooper argues that, "the gender bias is evident in this unsettling shift of meaning from the domain of the literal and superficial - dress/appearance - to that of the metaphorical and substantive - moral conduct" (p. 3). Therefore, a woman is slack when she behaves contrary to society's accepted definition of "virtuous," and chooses to express herself however and whenever she is inspired.

Shabba Ranks is an international, Grammy-winning dancehall DJ. He is the first dancehall star to have an international impact (Chang & Chen, 1998). One of his hits both home and abroad, "Muscle Grip" on the X-Tra Naked album, illustrates the release and empowerment of the female gender from the chains of the "[undermining] eurocentric, chivalric romance of woman as [a] delicate flower" (Cooper, 2004, p. 95).

[Jamaican Creole]

Ooman, yuh pritti laka flowahs Dat alone nah guh du Aldough yuh pritti suh, man stil a lef yuh Yuh luk gud, fram a luk gud pint a vue Aldough yuh luk gud, ooman dem luk gud tu If yuh cahn't ole yuh man, a gyal a tek im fram yuh Ave di grip, ave di mussl, im ave fi cum bak tu yuh

[Jamaican Standard English]

Woman, although you are as pretty as a flower That alone will not be enough Even though you are really pretty, the man will still leave you You look good from a physical point of view But although you look good, other women look good too If you cannot hold on to your man, another girl will take him from you Have the right grip, have the right muscle tone, and he will have to come back to you.

These lyrics make it explicitly clear that women are more than figurines to dust and admire. They are actually vying for the healthy interest women ought to have in regards to their sexuality. In order to acquire and keep a man, the woman ought to understand and utilize her sexual prowess, to grip and hold the man in her life; or the sexually explicit symbolization is the woman's vaginal muscles being tight enough to hold or "grip" the man's penis during intercourse. While opposing the dominant culture's definition of the woman as the delicate and passive receiver, the message in the song is similar to the thriving indigenous dancehall culture that believes in taking charge of its own interests.

In order to facilitate the evolving needs and expectations within society, things and times continuously change. Likewise, "Jamaican popular culture keeps on renewing itself, transforming norms of sexual decorum to suit the material conditions of the changing times" (Cooper, 2004, p. 97). What is considered slack in the dancehall culture, is supposedly a way of life for many. Many DJs sing about what they know, experience, and live with. Cooper (1995) quotes Harry Allen, as he critiques the generic analysis of experts about hip hop, a part African-American popular culture:

. . . cultural historians are talking about hip hop and find themselves tossing long, funny words into the air to describe it. Words like deconstruction, appropriation, iconography and recontextualization. But those words have little to do with the way African-American people live or make music, and hip hop is no more or less than Black life on black vinyl. Whatever one finds in the community, they'll find in the records. This has a lot to do with why it's so attractive to some people and repulsive to others. (p. 146)

The dancehall culture was created and at present, exists in this context. Dancehall, as well as the dancehall culture, are exhaust pipes for the crippling and cramping conventions that have been suffocating the indigenous culture. "The vitality of a native music is surely the sign of a people's self-confidence" (Chang & Chen, 1998, p. 3); a yeast-like self-confidence, in spite of hardships and setbacks. Chang & Chen (1998) describe the functionality of dancehall music fittingly:

. . . Jamaicans seem so exuberant, so ready to laugh at life, so totally at ease with themselves and the world, that it's hard not to think of them as the most enjoyable people on earth. And dancehall, which reflects all these qualities, feels like the most invigorating music the times have to offer. . . . Music obviously reflects a peoples' character, perhaps it is the most profound reflection. And music's primary role will always be to give convincing expressions of emotions, to express what people feel but cannot themselves describe. What [the people] like most in dancehall is its utter emotional honesty, the fearlessness with which it discusses almost any issue and situation The deejays talk about what they see and experience. Some bleat about 'sexism' and 'racism,' and the 'punnany' and gun business may be unpleasant. But reality is reality. No sensible person advocates slackness and gun talk. . . . But there must be a reason why it's popular in the dancehall. (p. 203)

The apple does not fall far from the tree, and the roots of the Jamaican popular culture stem from the personal experiences, energy, and cultural history of the underprivileged majority of the Jamaican people. The desire to move and feel the infectious drum beat can lead a body to move and express in innumerable ways, even those ways the "clean," "decent" Jamaicans classify as

slack. DJs Prezident Brown and Don Yute defend the dancing styles labeled 'slack' in their song "African Ting on the album entitled Prezident Selections:"

[Jamaican Creole] Don Yute: If yuh si a gyal a whine pon har ed top Nuh bodda put on nuh labl like di gyal slack Ah vybz shi a vybz to di sown weh shi ear Is a African ting an shi bring it down ear It's a African ting suh African peopl sing An ef yuh luv what yuh ear Mek mi ear yuh chanting All di dahns dem weh a caaz all a xplojan All a dem a cum fram inna di maddalan . . .

[Jamaican Standard English] If you see a girl gyrating on the top of her head Don't label her as slack because she is just feeling the music It's coming from Africa and she is bring it to the dance hall It's an African thing, so African people sing And if you like what you hear, sing along All the dances that are exploding on the scene All come from the motherland

Don Yute is imploring the critics to analyze the dancehall culture based on the repressed culture of the majority's African forefathers. It is this regeneration of the oppressed majority's silenced history that has the masses yearning for more and the elites' crying for censorship. This is history repeating itself with the slave being told that his culture is inferior, barbaric, and immoral, but the colonizer's culture is proper, pure, and true. Slackness then becomes a signifier for expressing one's need for acknowledgement, one's need for satisfaction, and one's need to collect on what has been denied due to the injustice of colonialism.

Lady Saw, a female DJ who is regarded as the slackest female in the business, uses the word slackness in the context expressed prior, to highlight the many inefficiencies within the dominant social structure, and its exploitation of the oppressed majority. She brilliantly uses their own weapon of censorship against them in the song "What Is Slackness," on the album entitled Give Me The Reason:

[Jamaican Creole] Wahnt to noah what slakniss iz? I'll be di witnis tu dat... Az mi seh "sex" dem waa fi jump pon mi cays But tek di beem outta yuh yeye Bifour yuh chat inna mi face Caaz slakniss is wen di roahd waan fi fix Slakniss iz wen palitishan ishu out gun An let di two Pahti a shat dem wan anneda down.

[Jamaican Standard English] Do you want to know what slackness is? I'll be the witness... I just have to say "sex" and everyone is on my case But take the beam out of your eyes Before you say anything to me Because slackness is when the roads need to be fixed Slackness is when the politicians are issuing guns And allowing the party supporters to shoot each other.

In Jamaica, the dancehall culture is the underprivileged majority's space to embody all aspects of expression, independence, and freedom that the dominant culture has monopolized for centuries. Slackness in dancehall music is a manifestation of the need for separation from the established conventions in order to create an identity that reflects the experiences and spirit of the Jamaican people. Ironically, this culture of slackness that has the 'nice' middle class frothing at the mouth is the same culture that is making the Jamaican culture, one of the most interesting and attractive in the world.

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