



**SWEET & SOUR SAUCE:
SEXUAL POLITICS IN JAMAICAN DANCEHALL CULTURE**

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By

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Abstract

In this paper, Carolyn Cooper explores sexual politics in Jamaican dancehall culture, arguing transgressively for the freedom of women to claim a self-pleasuring sexual identity that may even be explicitly homoerotic. She analyzes particular contemporary music and movements of Jamaican women in dancehalls, and explores the credentialising of sexual orientation in Jamaican culture.

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SWEET & SOUR SAUCE: SEXUAL POLITICS IN JAMAICAN DANCEHALL CULTURE

“Saltfish, it sweeter than meat
When you want to eat
All saltfish sweet”

Sparrow

“Just like how a man can’t live without flour
Or how a man can’t live without rice
A so a man cannot live without wife”

Shabba Ranks

Jamaican dancehall music is much lamented both at home and abroad as a primal scream: a barbaric, degenerate, eschatological sound. I suppose scatological as well. More broadly, Jamaican dancehall culture is commonly disparaged as a misogynist, homophobic, homicidal discourse that reduces both men and women to bare essentials: skeletal remains. In this dehumanising caricature women are misrepresented as mindless bodies, (un)dressed and on display exclusively for male sexual pleasure. And men are stereotyped as dog-hearted predators stalking potential victims. It is the animal nature of both genders that is foregrounded. It is true that sex and violence – basic instincts – are recurring themes in the lyrics of both male and female DJs. The dancehall is, essentially, a heterosexual space (heterosexist, even) in which men and women play out eroticised gender roles in ritual dramas that can become violent.

But sex and violence, however primal, are not the only preoccupations of Jamaican dancehall culture. There is a powerful current of explicitly political lyrics that

articulate the struggle of the celebrants in the dance to reclaim their humanity in circumstances of grave economic hardship that force the animal out of its lair. Indeed, Jamaican dancehall culture celebrates the dance as a mode of theatrical self-disclosure in which the body speaks eloquently of its capacity to endure and transcend material deprivation.

Jamaican dancehall music is the site of an ongoing struggle between respectability and riot, propriety and vulgarity, slackness and culture. In Jamaican usage, the English word slackness has almost exclusively sexual overtones and is synonymous with licentiousness – “libertine, lascivious, lewd” behaviour – to cite the alliterative OED definition of licentiousness. But the license in the English licentiousness is often repressed in its Jamaican equivalent and only the censure remains.

The *Dictionary of Jamaican English* does not have an entry on ‘slackness.’ But it does define a “slack” as “1. a slovenly person. 2. a woman of loose morals.” 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. The gender neutral “slovenly person” becomes the gender specific “woman of loose morals.” Slackness becomes essentialised as the generic condition of immoral woman, not man. Women are supposed to be the perennial guardians of private and public morality; men are allowed to extemporise.

Arguing transgressively for the freedom of women to claim a self-pleasuring sexual identity that may even be explicitly homoerotic, I propose that Jamaican dancehall culture at home and in the diaspora is best understood as a potentially

liberating space in which working-class women and their more timid middle-class sisters assert the freedom to play out eroticised roles that may not ordinarily be available to them in the rigid social conventions of the everyday. The dancehall becomes an erogenous zone in which the celebration of female sexuality and fertility is ritualised as men pay homage to the female principle.

In less subtle readings of the gender politics of the dancehall, this self-conscious female assertion of control over the representation of the body (and identity) is misunderstood and the therapeutic potential of the dancing body is repressed. Indeed, the joyous display of the female body in the dance is misperceived as a pornographic devaluation of woman. In addition, the unapologetic materialism of dancehall culture, with its valorisation of ‘bling bling’ – all of the trappings of worldly success – is much derided by both self-appointed middle-class arbiters of ‘good’ taste as well as by fundamentalist Christians who, in theory, mortify the flesh.

But the desire to own an ornate gold chain, for example, is not essentially different from the pervasive middle-class Jamaican aspiration to acquire a house that could easily pass as a castle; or the fundamentalist Christian’s intention to walk on streets paved with gold. Indeed, Ian Boyne, Christian pastor and radio/television presenter in Jamaica, who ordinarily lashes out against dancehall culture, somewhat surprisingly attacks Christians as well for their materialism:

The dancehall becomes an erogenous zone in which the celebration of female sexuality and fertility is ritualised as men pay homage to the female principle.

The Christianity which is really “running things” in Jamaica today is the “Bling-bling” Christianity. Through the widespread penetration of cable television and the

existence of **Love TV**, Jamaicans are exposed to a brand of North American Christianity which is promoting a very jaundiced view of the gospel. It’s called the health and wealth gospel and it teaches that prosperity is a divine right that is promised to every believer.¹

Boyne’s self-righteousness aside, one must concede that the desire for gold – whether ‘sacred’ or ‘secular’ – originates in the common human desire to enjoy luxury. To cite Shakespeare’s *King Lear*: “Allow not nature more than nature needs,/ Man’s life is cheap as beast’s.”

The fantastic (un)dress code of the dancehall in Jamaica is a glamorous expression of a distinctive cultural style that allows women the liberty to demonstrate the seductive appeal of the imaginary – and their own bodies. The spectacular dress – the hair, make-up, clothes and body language – enhances the illusion of a fairytale metamorphosis of the mundane self into eroticised sex object. In an elaborate public strip tease, transparent bedroom garments become theatrical street wear, somewhat like the emperor’s new clothes. And who dares say that the body is naked? Only the naive.

This passion for aesthetic experimentation and role play underscores a hidden parallel between the annual rituals of carnival masquerading in other Caribbean societies and everyday Jamaican dancehall culture. The importation of an adulterated Trinidad carnival aesthetic into Jamaican popular culture has resulted in the cross-fertilisation of traditions of role-play in which costume, dance and music are central. Carnival creates a platform for predominantly

¹Ian Boyne, “Bling-Bling Christianity Run Things,” *The Sunday Gleaner*, July 20, 2003, G2.

upper/middle-class brown and white Jamaicans to seemingly abandon respectability, parade their nakedness in the streets and ‘get on bad’ i.e. pass for black, on their terms. Everyday Jamaican dancehall culture permits the black majority to enjoy the pleasures of release from the prison of identity that limits the definition of the person to one’s social class and colour. There are, it is all too true, profound psycho-sociological underpinnings of this desire to be/play the other that cannot be simply written off as mere entertainment. Role-play both conceals and reveals deep-seated anxieties about the body that has been incised with the scarifications of history.

The flamboyantly exhibitionist DJ Lady Saw epitomises the sexual liberation of many African-Jamaican working-class women from airy-fairy Judaeo-Christian definitions of appropriate female behaviour. In a decisive act of feminist emancipation, Lady Saw cuts loose from the burdens of moral guardianship. She embodies the erotic. But one viewer’s erotica is another’s pornography. So Lady Saw is usually censured for being far too loose – or ‘slack,’ in the Jamaican vernacular. Or worse, is dismissed as a mere victim of patriarchy, robbed of all agency. Marian Hall’s spectacular performance of the role of “Lady Saw” is not often acknowledged as a calculated decision by the actress to make the best of the opportunity to earn a good living in the theatre of the dancehall.

For example, American anthropologist Obiagele Lake in her book *Rastafari Women: Subordination in the Midst of Liberation Theology* indicts Lady Saw in a chapter on “Misogyny in Caribbean Music”: “Given Jamaica’s patriarchal climate, one would expect sexist

lyrics emanating from men. Unfortunately, women who have internalized sexist norms add to these negative images. Lady Saw is one such songstress who plays herself and, by association, all other women. ‘Stab Up [sic] the Meat’ is the most graphic example.”² The title of this raunchy song is, in fact, “Stab Out the Meat” and in some variants the definite article ‘the’ becomes the possessive ‘mi.’ I do concede that, in performance, Lady Saw’s ‘out’ does sound like ‘up,’ especially if one is predisposed to hear violent abuse of women in sexist dancehall lyrics.

Furthermore, to some listeners who are insensitive to the nuances of the Jamaican language, there may be no significant difference between stabbing up and stabbing out. But the latter is more allusive than the former. Lake’s inaccurate

In a decisive act of feminist emancipation, Lady Saw cuts loose from the burdens of moral guardianship.

transcription reinforces her literal-minded reading of the ‘sexist’ lyrics of that song and entirely misses the metaphorical elements that highlight the intense pleasure of vigorous, not violent, sex. The penis here functions as an erotic dagger stabbing pleasure into and out of the woman. Conventional associations of orgasm and death in Western culture are just as applicable to Jamaican dancehall culture.

The startling imagery of stabbing meat, whether out or up, also underscores the traditional association between food and sex in Caribbean culture. The allusion to stabbing is decidedly *not* a sign of Lady Saw’s sado-masochism but rather an accurate image of the way in which meat is

²Obiagele Lake, *Rastafari Women: Subordination in the Midst of Liberation Theology*, Durham: Carolina Academic Press, 1998, 131.

seasoned in Caribbean cookery: it is literally pricked and the spices inserted. The metaphor of the woman's genitalia as meat doubles the pleasure of eating, though in this song Lady Saw, like most male DJs declares that she, herself, refuses to eat 'fur burger.' Despite the recurring protestations in the lyrics of the DJs that they do not 'bow' – that is engage in oral sex – one instinctively knows that they are protesting too much. There is a thin line between public/pubic discourse and private pleasure/duty.³

What sounds to Obiagele Lake's unseasoned North American ears like straightforward abuse of the female body can be reinterpreted from a Caribbean perspective as an x-rated affirmation of the complicated pleasures of heightened sexual passion:

Mi hear you can grind good and
can fuck straight.
Stab out mi meat, stab out mi meat.
The big hood [penis] you have a
mad gal outa street.
Stab out mi meat.⁴

Obiagele Lake chastises not only Lady Saw but also those of us fans who pay careful attention to the full range of the DJ's lyrics and know that she is not a one-dimensional artiste who uncritically reproduces sexist norms. In addition to the sexually explicit songs for which she is infamous, Lady Saw's repertoire includes impeccable hymns, country and western laments, songs of

³Female DJ Ce'Cile in her song "Do It To Me" celebrates the pleasures of cunnilingus, advising men to speak the truth about their sexual practices: "Watch dem a talk bout no but dem a dweet" [Just look at them saying that they don't do it], King of Kings label. 2003.

⁴Lake's transcription is inaccurate: "outa street" [out on the streets] becomes the nonsensical "out of straight." In performance, Lady Saw elongates the vowel so that 'street' does sound like 'straight.' But knowledge of the language makes the meaning clear.

warning to women about the wiles of men and politically 'conscious' lyrics that constitute hardcore socio-cultural analysis. Failing to understand the complexity of Lady Saw's anansi *persona* and thus her appeal to a wide cross-section of intelligent fans, a bemused Obiagele Lake totally dismisses the recuperative reading of the body of woman in dancehall culture that is offered by both Inge Blackman and myself in the 1994 Isaac Julien film, *The Darker Side of Black*, directed by Lina Gopaul: "... it is perplexing how scholars can honor dance hall music and dance hall behaviors that graphically devalue women since this behavior is nothing more than a continuation of women's objectification. Popular culture critic Carolyn Cooper (1993) condones misogynist lyrics as well as women's lascivious behaviors on the dance floor."⁵

I do no such thing. I celebrate Lady Saw's entertaining and instructive lyrics, which *Lake* devalues as "misogynist"; and I valorize the erotic dancing that she disdains as "lascivious." Lake launches an amusing line of *ad feminam* attack: "Film director Inge Blackman expresses similar sentiments in Gopaul's film. What is interesting about these views is that it is very unlikely that either Cooper or Blackman would ever appear scantily dressed, performing sexual shows like the women they describe."⁶

The pertinence of Lake's assumptions about my own sartorial preferences and sexual proclivities entirely escapes me. Nevertheless, for the record, let me unashamedly confess that I once performed in a sexual show – even if not as the primary object/subject on display – and thoroughly enjoyed myself. A few years ago I attended

⁵Obiagele Lake, *Rastafari Women: Subordination in the Midst of Liberation Theology*, Durham: Carolina Academic Press, 1998, 132.

⁶*Ibid.*

a male strip show at Carlos' Café in Kingston. I was invited to experience a lap dance with one Mr. Well Hung, whose day job was barbering in Ocho Rios. He certainly knew how to cut it. Having teased me in my seat, the stripper then pulled me on stage and engaged me in protracted role-play as we danced rub-a-dub style, much to the pleasure of the audience. I certainly know how to distinguish between entertainment, plain and simple, and misogyny. Or, in this case, misandry, to coin a word for the equivalent 'hatred' of man – as expressed in the objectification of the male body, put on display for the purely visual pleasure of the female.

Lake concludes her reprimand thus:

"Moreover, Cooper's analysis of the issue of sexism is extremely narrow since it does not address the fact that most people see women *only* in terms of their bodies. Behaving in extremely sexual ways – often to attract men – does nothing to alter this fact."⁷ I must question the authority of that all-encompassing generalisation that 'most people' fail to acknowledge the fact that woman is more than mere meat. Furthermore, in this 'screwed-up' reading of gender politics, sexual attraction between men and women is constructed as entirely pathological. Old-fashioned 'sex appeal' becomes new-fangled neurosis. But, surely, the pleasure that men and women share in sexual relationships of mutual trust can be acknowledged as therapeutic not exploitative. Self-righteous critics of the sexualised representation of women in Jamaican dancehall culture, who claim to speak unequivocally on behalf of 'oppressed' women, often fail to acknowledge the pleasure that women themselves consciously take in the salacious

lyrics of both male and female DJs who affirm the sexual power of women.

I do concede that, as Lake rightly observes, commercial sex workers (both male and female) are often disempowered, caught in a cycle of exploitation from which escape is difficult: "Women have been undressing for men in theaters and bars for centuries – the more they take off, the more they shake and gyrate, the more pleasure men receive. This is not new. Indeed, if liberation were as simple as disrobing, exposing yourself in public, and having public sex, women would

have been free long ago."⁸ But not all consensual adult sex in the dancehall can be reduced to the lowest common commercial

In the spirit of benevolent patriarchy, Shabba exhorts women to control the 'commodification' of their body and ensure that men value them appropriately.

denominator. Indeed, in the film *Dancehall Queen*, a pointed contrast is established between Larry's phallogocentric sex shop, where working women glide up and down a rigid pole, and the much more fluid space of the dancehall where 'loose' women enjoy the pleasures of uninhibited display.

I now turn to the lyrics of Shabba Ranks, dancehall's first international superstar to illustrate the ways in which contemporary dancehall culture is much more sophisticated than is usually assumed. An artiste like Shabba Ranks who is stereotypically defined as 'sexist' because of his raw celebration of sexuality and his extra-naked attention to female bodies proves to be much more cunning than is ordinarily assumed when one carefully reads not just his body language (and his music videos) but also his lyrics. His sensitivity to the plight of materially impoverished woman and his advocacy of egalitarian gender relations, particularly in matters of sexual politics, are truly remarkable.

⁷*Ibid.*

⁸*Ibid.*, 132-33.

In the spirit of benevolent patriarchy, Shabba exhorts women to control the 'commodification' of their body and ensure that men value them appropriately. This constitutes a radical politics and economics of the sexual body. In "Gone Up," from the *As Raw as Ever* 1991 CD, Shabba, like Lady Saw, playing on the proverbial association between food and sex in Caribbean culture, notes that the price of a number of commodities is going up: "Crotches! Sausage! Everything is going up. Bully beef, rice."⁹ To a chorus of affirmative female voices, he asks women a rather pointed question and proceeds to give advice on negotiating a mutually beneficial sexual contract:

Jamaican:

Woman, wa unu a do fi unu lovin?
(Wi a raise it to)

Before yu let off di work
Yu fi defend some dollars first

Mek a man know seh

Ten dollar can't buy French cut

No mek no man work yu out

Body line, old truck.¹⁰

English:

Women, what are you going to do
About your loving?
(We are raising [the price of] it, too)
Before you have sex
You must make sure to negotiate
first
Let the man know that
Ten dollars can't buy French cut
[lingerie]
Don't let the man work over
Your body [as if it's an] old truck.

Shabba makes it clear that he is not advocating prostitution. The complicated relationships between men and women cannot be reduced to purely economic terms of exchange. Shabba asserts that a man must assume a measure of social and economic responsibility for his sexual partner; it is, ultimately, a moral issue:

Jamaican:

Is not a matter a fact seh dat unu a
sell it.

But some man seh dat dem want it.

As dem get it, dem run gone lef it.

No mek no man run gone lef it

An yu no get profit

Everything a raise, so weh unu a
do?

Unu naa raise di price a unu pum-
pum to?¹¹

English:

It's not that you're actually selling
it.

But some men say that they want it.

As soon as they get it, they run
away and leave it.

Don't let the man run away and
leave it

And you don't profit

Everything is going up so what are
you going to do?

Aren't you going to raise the price
of your pussy too?

Indeed, Shabba challenges the stereotype of the robotic, domesticated female who is too timid to question the unequal exchange of services and resources in her household:

¹²Jamaican:

⁹Shabba Ranks, "Gone Up," Track 5, *As Raw as Ever*, Sony, 468102 2, 1991.

¹⁰Ibid.

¹¹Ibid.

¹²

Have some woman gwaan like dem
no worth

Hitch up inna house like a house
robot
House fi clean, dem clean dat up

An clothes fi wash, dem wash dat
up
An dollars a run an dem naa get
enough¹³

English

There are some women who
behave as if they have no worth
Confined to the house as though
they are house robots
House to be cleaned, they clean it
Clothes to be washed, they wash
them
Dollars are flowing and they don't
get enough

Shabba scathingly indicts irresponsible men
who, instead of spending money to support
their household, would rather waste their
resources carousing with their male cronies:

Jamaican:

Now yu have some man no want
do no spending
Dem uda do di spending pon dem
bredrin
An naa buy dem darling a
icymint¹⁴

English:

Now there are some men who
don't want to spend
They would rather spend all their
money on their male friends
And wouldn't buy even an icymint
for their darling

An icymint is one of the cheapest sweets on
the market. The depth of the delinquent

man's failure is thus measured in very
common currency.

The DJ's compassion for female house
robots and his equal contempt for sexist
males who are stingy in domestic matters
echo the critique of gender relations that
Jamaican folklorist and poet Louise Bennett
offers in her dramatic monologue "Oman
Equality:"

Jamaican:

Nuff oman deh pon a seh dat dem
a seek liberation from man-
dominance, counta how some man
got a way fi chat bout seh
'Woman's place is in the home', an
a demands seh dat oman tan a yard
so wash an cook an clean all day
long, an teck any lickle money
pittance what de husband waan
fling pon dem a week time, an
meck it stretch fi provide food an
clothes an shelter, meanwhile de
husban-dem a drink an gamble as
dem like.¹⁵

English:

A lot of woman are insisently
seeking liberation from the
dominance of men who advocate
that a woman's place is in the
home. These men demand that the
woman stay at home, washing and
cooking and cleaning all day long.
Then, at the end of the week, she is
forced to take whatever pittance
the husband throws her way. She
has to make do with the little she
gets, stretching it to cover the cost
of food, clothing and shelter, while
he's drinking and gambling as he
pleases.

Bennett is not a writer whom one would
readily identify with the 'slackness' of
dancehall culture, though I do argue that her

¹³Ibid.

¹⁴Ibid.

¹⁵Mervyn Morris, ed. Louise Bennett, *Aunty Roachy
Seb*, Kingston: Sangster's, 1993, 67.

choice of Jamaican as the preferred language of verbal creativity does align her to an outlaw tradition of resistance to eurocentric, upper case High Culture. Contesting this argument, Ian Boyne declares:

There will be those who will seek to validate their vulgarity and cultural perversion by appealing to Miss Lou, noting the resistance she received from ‘society people’ when she started with the dialect. But don’t involve Miss Lou inna unno [in your] nastiness. Everyone who knows her knows she hated profanity with a passion. Lady Saw is no modern-day Miss Lou! Vulgarity and the ‘skin out, bruk out’ thing is not our ‘culture.’ It is imported from abroad.¹⁶

There are, indeed, rare hints of sexual slackness in Miss Lou’s repertoire, admittedly not of the exponentially x-rated Lady Saw variety. Mervyn Morris, in his teaching notes to Bennett’s poem “Registration,” uncovers the sexual double-entendre in the following lines:

Jamaican:

Lawd-amassi, me feel happy

For me glad fi see at las

Oman dah meck up dem mine fi
Serve back man dem sour sauce!¹⁷

English:

Lord have mercy, I feel happy
For I’m glad to see that at last
Women have made up their minds
To serve men their own sour sauce

Morris notes that “sauce here suggests semen; it is implied that women have

decided to do to men what, sexually, men have done to them.”¹⁸

Shabba, underscoring the fundamental necessity of sweet and sour sauce – both sex and food – urges men to assume economic responsibility for the eating that they do:

Jamaican:

Just like how a man can’t live
without flour

Or how a man can’t live without
rice

A so a man cannot live without
wife

Yu have di uman

Spend nuff pon her right¹⁹

English:

Just as a man can’t live without
flour

Or a man can’t live without rice

In the same way, a man can’t live
without a wife

You’re a man

Spend a lot on her, [as is only] right

Though some women will decidedly object to the DJ’s equating of rice/flour/wife, what is paramount here is Shabba’s undermining of the popular middle-class Jamaican stereotype of the irresponsible working-class ‘baby-father,’ who assumes neither social nor economic responsibility for his woman and offspring.

Furthermore, Shabba’s conviction that “a man can’t live without a wife” is a classic example of the normalization of heterosexuality in Jamaican society and its heightened forms of expression in dancehall culture. Many Jamaicans vigorously object to being labelled as ‘homophobic.’ Claiming their heterosexuality as ‘normative,’ they reject the negative

¹⁶Ian Boyne, “True and Still Unspoilt Icon: The One and Only Miss Lou,” *The Sunday Gleaner*, August 3, 2003, G3.

¹⁷Mervyn Morris, ed. Louise Bennett, *Selected Poems*, Kingston: Sangster’s, 1982, 58.

¹⁸*Ibid.*, 142.

¹⁹Shabba Ranks, “Gone Up,” Track 5, *As Raw As Ever*, Sony, 468102 2, 1991.

connotations of the ‘phobia’ in homophobia. For them it is homosexuality that is the morbidity – not their culturally legitimated aversion to it.

But just as prevaricating Christians are taught to ‘hate the sin and love the sinner,’ Jamaicans are generally socialised to recognise the fact that *anti-homosexuality* values are entirely compatible with knowing acceptance of *homosexuals* within the community. This is a fundamental paradox that illustrates the complexity of the ideological negotiations that are constantly made within the society. Most male homosexuals in Jamaica seem content to remain within the proverbial closet; but the door is wide open. They move comfortably across social borders. Then there are clearly ‘out’ homosexuals who work, for example, as higglers in Jamaican markets and ply their trade with relatively little provocation. Many have mastered the art of ‘tracing’ – ritualised verbal abuse – as a form of protection from the potentially murderous behaviours of unenlightened males.

Robert Carr, a Research Associate in the Centre for Population, Community and Social Change at the University of the West Indies, Mona, Jamaica, documents the extra-legal “judgement” that is often meted out to victimized homosexuals in Jamaica:

Such attacks have a name. They are called ‘batty judgements’. The fact that all of the informants knew what a ‘judgement’ was, although they did not necessarily know each other, attests to the ubiquity of the term. The concept of anything associated with homosexuality brings with it the anathema expressed by adding the term ‘batty’ to the phrase. Thus a group of men was harassed for promoting ‘batty business’ because they

had a number of condoms on them that they intended to distribute in promoting safer sex and condom use. “Battyman fi dead” (gay men must die) is a common expression that accompanies the community attacks. In one instance, a large crowd gathered to watch, chanting “battyman, battyman, battyman” while the attack took place. In that instance the man was beaten, kicked, stabbed, had filthy water from the gutter thrown on him by a gang of armed men. This level of brutality was a common thread reported by the informants, although large crowds gathering to watch are less common. The mere fact that someone is accused of being a ‘battyman’ is sufficient to trigger an attack of such violence.²⁰

The biblical term, “judgement,” with its Old Testament resonances of immediate fire and brimstone damnation, confirms the fundamentalist Christian genesis of this rampant hatred of homosexual behaviours in Jamaica, in general, and its manifestation in acts of brutality committed by working-class males, in particular. Though the aversion to homosexuality crosses class lines, expressions of physical violence against homosexuals are usually restricted to working-class communities where hierarchies of impoverishment and marginalisation are institutionalized. Indeed, class privilege usually insulates middle and upper class homosexual males in Jamaica from acts of heterosexist physical violence.

The credentialising of sexual orientation becomes necessary in a society whose political leaders, for example, do use the

²⁰Robert Carr, “On ‘Judgements’ Poverty, Sexuality-Based Violence and Human Rights in 21st Century Jamaica,” *The Caribbean Journal of Social Work*, Vol. 2, July 2003, 82.

alleged homosexuality of rivals as a deadly weapon. A spectacular example of this legitimating impulse is the surprising public declaration on the radio talk show, the *Breakfast Club*, made by the Prime Minister of Jamaica, P J Patterson in 2001: “My credentials as a life-long heterosexual person are impeccable.” The Opposition Jamaica Labour Party is notorious for attacking Prime Minister PJ Patterson on grounds of colour and, more recently, alleged sexual orientation. TOK’s popular anti-homosexuality song, “Chi-Chi Man,” was used by supporters of the Jamaica Labour Party as a rallying cry during a 2001 by-election campaign.²¹ “Chichi man” is current slang for homosexual. The *Dictionary of Jamaican English* defines ‘chichi’ as “the dry-wood termite *Cryptotermes brevis*” and notes that it is “prob[ably] from some African form indicating small size.” One wonders if the “chichi man” slang extension of the meaning is intended to represent the homosexual as a diminutive man. In addition, since “wood/hood” is a Jamaican creole metaphor for “penis,” “chichi man” could also suggest the vulnerability of the homosexual’s manhood to chichi of all kinds.

In addition, “homophobia” in neo-African societies like Jamaica is often conceived as an articulation of an Africanist world-view in which the essential complementary of opposites is affirmed: earth/sky; male/female etc. There is a popular Jamaica proverb that uses a vivid domestic image to define the “unnaturalness” of homosexuality: “Two pot cover[s] can’t shut.” The pot (female) and its cover (male) naturally go together. Heterosexual intercourse – the shutting of pot with cover – is idealised as normative. The proverb’s clear proscription against the attempt to shut two covers (or, by implication, two

pots) can be decoded as an affirmation of Afrocentric norms of sexual propriety.

Shabba Ranks’s pragmatism in matters of sexual politics, like Lady Saw’s, is firmly rooted in Jamaican peasant values. A number of Jamaican proverbs not only assume heterosexuality as normative but also affirm the clear correlation of love, sex and money in folk culture:

1. When money done, love done.
2. Man can’t marry if him don’t have cashew.
3. When man have coco-head²² in a barrel, him can go pick wife.
4. When pocket full, and bankra²³ full, woman laugh.
5. Cutacoo²⁴ full, woman laugh.
6. Woman and wood, and woman and water, and woman and money never quarrel.²⁵
7. You must find a place to put your head before you find a hole to put your hood.

As Jamaican society evolves from a rural, peasant-based agricultural economy to an urban, wage-earning economy new modes of articulation of cultural norms and sexual practices arise. Old-fashioned peasant values of relatively settled domestic order on small land holdings give way to more modern notions of commodified exchange of goods and services in relatively²⁶ unstable urban settlements. Sexual relations between men and women often reflect prevailing socio-economic conditions. It is not only sexual relations that are now commercialized in the urban setting. For example, informal,

²¹TOK, “Chi-Chi Man,” Track 4, *Reggae Gold 2001*, VP Records, VPCD 1629, 2001.

²²“The rootstock or rhizome of the coco plant as distinct from the tuber, which is a coco.” *Dictionary of Jamaican English*.

²³A basket, normally larger than the ‘cutacoo.’

²⁴A field-basket used by hunters and cultivators.

²⁵Here literal “firewood” which denotes material prosperity becomes a metaphor for the erect penis – ‘wood’ as ‘hood.’

²⁶

communal child-care systems in rural areas give way to the organised business of the urban day-care industry.

The secular economics of contemporary dancehall gender politics constitutes an urban updating of the proverbial wisdom of Jamaican folk culture. The saucy sexual discourse of Jamaican dancehall DJs, like that of their mento antecedents, is an essential element of their total performance repertoire. Like their calypsonian counterparts, dancehall DJs deploy pungent metaphors to elaborate the recurring identification of sex and food in Caribbean popular culture. Lady Saw and Shabba Ranks are exemplary exponents of this genre. Their salacious lyrics are routinely dissed by their detractors as evidence of their creators' moral degeneracy. Conversely, I argue that the oral/sexual politics of these brazen artists confirms the longevity of an African-derived cosmology in which the sacred and the profane, the body and the spirit are equally valorised.

Thank you.

QUESTION AND ANSWER PERIOD

What is your perception of nakedness throughout dancehall video, and would you see those images as synonymous with pornography?

I don't see it as pornographic. I see it as very graphic, and I think that we need to think about why the body, and its nakedness, is read in such a negative way in Western culture.

[In] the clip that you played from Lady Saw, she said that she would enjoy the sex, and if we accept your reading of the piece she is engaging in it and

enjoying it. But she also seems to accept a powerlessness in the relationship as well, because she says that if she gets pregnant she will accept if he leaves her. And so some of the concerns of middle-class society, about the way poor women or working class women see themselves in this relationship and the kind of misogyny that they are exposed to, seems played out in that particular clip, wouldn't you say?

No, I wouldn't say. What I would say, for example, is that her willingness to look after the child if he leaves her is a sign of her power—that she has the resources to look after the child by herself. Is that not a viable reading of that line?

Understanding the culture, I don't know that we could say that she has the resources to take care of that child, if we connect that to what Shabba Ranks says. Women are bartering their sexuality for money in order to take care of children they may have from other fathers as well.

All right, but if we assume that the persona in the song is Lady Saw, then Lady Saw can more than look after ten *pickney*; she has economic resources. Now, I take the point that there are some women who may not have the resources to look after these children. One of the interesting issues that you have raised is the fact that in Jamaican society, as in other Caribbean societies, men and women tend to seal their relationships, and many times it is more the women who are doing the sealing than the men. Sometimes the men are unwilling sperm donors. They tend to seal the relationship by having children. And as these relationships break down and they enter into new relationships with people, they keep on sealing the relationship. So when middle-class people say “how she have so much *pickney* with so much different man?” they get on as though they don't understand how that happens. And many of them end up in very oppressive relationships with one

man, having five or four or three children with the same man who is behaving to them like different men anyhow. It don't matter that they're having all these children for the same man because he's treating them bad the same way. So, in other words, once you step back from the idea of "so many different fathers," you understand it's so many different relationships.

And one of the interesting things we do not like to talk about is the way in which class privilege gives access to abortion to middle-class women—an access that working class women don't have so readily. So you can get pregnant and go to your doctor and get set up, but the working class woman can't, and a lot of these women would have aborted these children if they had the chance to do so. But then, you also have to look at the way in which, in dancehall culture for example, DJ's will say, "*Hol' up yuh hand if yuh no dash web belly.*" "*Hol' up yuh hand if you have had an abortion.*" So that even though raising these children is hard work, it is seen as valuable work. It is seen as being human to have all these children, and even if you had the option of abortion the fact that you didn't use it means that you are a "decent" human being. So, you know, we have to really look at the contradictory values that are embedded in behaviour. We can't just say Lady Saw is being oppressed when she says, "If you leave me after we have had the good sex I am willing to look after its product."

I must address that one. In Jamaica we say that "if it wot it"—you know, "if it's worth it"—then that child, having been conceived from the pleasure he gave you or provided, you would, of course, feel the need to keep the child. Now we don't have a problem with having children. We don't have a problem with it. We feel powerful when we demand

"the way how we want it," wouldn't you say? Lady Saw speaks for a lot of us because sisters have a way of being too conservative in the bedroom, and it's nice—it's best to be—not conservative there. Address that for me.

We assume that men are mind readers, you know? And some of the men are not as experienced or sophisticated as they think they are, so you had better guide their hands and their minds if you want proper satisfaction.

I started looking at dancehall, and growing up in Jamaica without a father who was in Canada over the years I was growing up, I did not understand listening to the music that it could have such a profound impact until I started relearning it. And I am wondering when I listen to music and dancehall (not to say all dancehall but a lot of dancehall DJs) if they actually love black women: "Bruck her up; cock her up; mash her up." It seems to me in those [types of] music, we are trying to "mash her up" for some reason, and

...we have to really look at the contradictory values that are embedded in behaviour.

I didn't know why I was wanting to "mash her up" all this time. But now looking at it, I'm thinking, maybe, I want to love her a little bit gentler. What do you think of those situations in the music?

Now even though you said you didn't have a father, one of the issues that I want to look at is the way in which so many men in Jamaica do nurture children who are not their own. So that I am sure that you might have had an uncle, or a cousin, or some other person, who functioned in that father role. So we mustn't assume no parenting. That means absolutely no access to nurturing male figures.

The other thing, too, is that we have in Jamaica, as we have elsewhere, men who assume paternity under very dubious circumstances. In Jamaica I heard a man say, he don't mind if the woman says it's his

child and it's not his because plenty man wearing jacket him cut. There is a metaphor we use of the jacket to describe the child whose paternity has not been rightly assigned.

But the larger issue you are raising is about *jack it up; dig it up*. Now, for example, I know that people say that I am perverse by trying to read this thing as positively as possible. For me, the "digging up" is an agricultural metaphor—the woman's body as fertile land. I mean Shabba has some lines. He has a song called "Flesh Axe": the land has to be chopped; the body land has to be chopped. And people read this and say this is sadomasochism.

Why would a man be describing a woman's body as ground to be chopped? If you are

coming out of an agricultural economy, land is a valuable resource, and the chopping of the land is a sign of the man's engagement with the woman in a positive way. Now I know that some of the younger DJs are coming out of an urban setting where I don't know that they are necessarily reading these images in a positive way. There is, for example, this youth, Vybz Kartel, who got into trouble because *him tump up* Ninja Man on stage. You've had these metaphorical clashes, but this was the first time you end up with two DJs fighting. Vybz Kartel has this song, "*Tek Buddy Gyal*," that some people get very upset about, where he is saying, "I am giving you all of these things, and if you get all of these things you have *to tek buddy*." Buddy is another Jamaican metaphor for penis. In light of the kind of reading of the not-quite commercial contract in the proverb "if you don't have money, you can't go look wife—if you don't have cash, if you don't have bankra." This is coming from a West African model of family in which the man is seen as the provider. Women were doing fieldwork and contributing, but there is a sense in which

the man is seen as the provider. Now I think that what is happening is some of these values are coming through the folk culture and coming up again in the urban setting. If you read novels by Chinua Achebe you know that a man could have more than one wife if he had the resources, so it's a question of many of our men trying to be polygamous on a budget. It can't work. It can't work, you know? So that is how you end up with these problems. And I really think that there is a sense in which what we are reading as prostitution can be seen as a DJ saying "you have to take responsibility for women and the relationships that you find yourself in." It's

not a question that you just have sex and go on about your business, and then you have sex with another

one. You have to take responsibility for your sexual behaviour. I think that is what is being said.

So there is that, but there is also, of course, the vigorous and violent sounding way in which sexuality is being metaphorically represented. But I don't know that we can say that all of this is meant to be pathological. Maybe the psychiatrists in the house can help, but from my perspective as a literary critic reading the metaphors, I want to say that I don't believe that the women who enjoy these songs are stupid; that I don't think that women are masochistic; that they enjoy lyrics that are abusive. I believe the women are reading the lyrics positively, and that is why they jump up to it.

This might seem a little simplistic, but I've always considered culture as being a construct as well as the different class structures, the different positions and interpretations on moral value or conduct in culture. To what degree do you think social perspective relevant to a class structure or moral structure plays

in the discourse for people criticizing Jamaican dancehall culture? And, if you agree with this, how do you approach addressing the role class structure, or moral structure, or different perspectives play in looking condescendingly on Jamaican dancehall culture? Is that valid?

You are asking a very complicated question and pretending it's simplistic. If I hear you properly, what you are asking is how does class impact on how people read dancehall? Is that basically what you are asking?

I am asking how different positions in the cultural structure look down on or up. . .

My reading of dancehall is a product of... well let me start with myself because I have to tell you how I got into this thing. The young man who does gardening at my house (at least a decade and a half he has been my gardener; I hate to sound proprietorial) but he used to bring his tape recorder to work. The work song is a tradition. Even in other contexts people used to have songs that they sang as they worked. The tape recorder was his work song. And one day I heard one of these songs being played. Now I know that it is ageism that just makes certain people *dis* dancehall, and I was one of the old people who wasn't listening to it. And I heard this one song, and it was a good story. I'm sorry I can't remember the song, but when I heard it, I said, "this is really clever." And that is how I started to listen, and the more I listened, the more I heard stuff coming out. So I know, for example, that I was not supposed to be doing this kind of work—my academic trajectory was to have kept me doing the kind of stuff that I did for my PhD at U of T on Derek Walcott. But even

I think that in Jamaica, dancehall culture is scapegoated; it's stigmatized; it's seen as the cause of all of our social problems. I keep wondering what would happen if the DJs just went on strike, and they said "we are not producing any lyrics, we are just going to behave."

Walcott, I found, was someone that I could recuperate from my contemporary work on popular culture because in Walcott's own body of work you see the kind of schizophrenia between his poetry and his plays. The plays are the ones that are speaking to the popular, the folk, and it is in the poetry that he has created this elaborate persona that is getting him stuck in Greek culture *ad infinitum* and not even acknowledging that a lot of the Greek culture came from Africa in the first place. So that when you ask about the social construct, I myself then represent somebody who, to some degree, has gone against the grain. And so I understand why

many of my colleagues think that I am wasting time. But then when these guys asked me to come do the lecture, and I was trying to think of something respectable to do, they said, "No, no, it's your dancehall work that we are interested in!" The irony is that sometimes you end up

doing stuff that you hadn't expected to do because of just one turn.

Now I think that your question also has to do with the people who are not doing this kind of work and why they have the negative attitude toward it. I think that in Jamaica, dancehall culture is scapegoated; it's stigmatized; it's seen as the cause of all of our social problems. And I keep wondering what would happen if the DJs just went on strike, and they said "we are not producing any lyrics, we are just going to behave." Would all of Jamaica's problems be solved? No. I hope I am answering your question, but I think the reason that people are so negative is because they are speaking out of their own class position, out of their own sense of politics, about who has the

power and who has a right to public discourse.

I think that your presentation is revolutionary in terms of understanding the culture of your people. Do you think that dancehall music will help bring Caribbean people [together]? Because it seems very much like calypso, because most of the lyrics is what you call satire where you say one thing but you mean the next thing. But I think that for the first time in a long time, maybe the people in Jamaica might be using the real condition. I think that reggae music is good, but the lyrics reflect a utopia of going back to Ethiopia, which I don't believe in. But dancehall, perhaps, is a more positive way to deal with the everyday life of the people. I think it's positive.

One of the things that keeps me going is the kind of feedback I get on the street. People stop me and say things like, “We love how you defend the culture. Go on, say away.” These are people on the road. And what I have tried to do is the stuff that we are doing at the University—this Reggae Studies Centre. It really sounds good and is a good idea, but we still haven't gotten the kind of funding that we need. But I have persevered for a decade and I was really amused because my attitude is that if I come up with this good idea, I don't see why I must go and look for the money too. I figure somebody else must fund it. So what I have done is things that cost no money. I have gotten a whole set of DJs and reggae artists to come in and talk in the public forums when Vybz Kartel had a forum on the “art of the clash.” And I got a Trinidadian scholar, who has been looking at the parallel with Trinidad and Carnival, to do a whole thing on the role of verbal sparring in African cultures. She looked at what happened in Trinidad and so on and tried to raise the level of the discourse because surprisingly both [Jamaican] newspapers had the same headline the day after the clash. And I wondered, did the two people get together and come up with

the same [headline]? It was eerie that they had the exact same headline condemning dancehall. I just think it's important for us to try to understand what is happening. And so lots of the stuff that we do gets taped, and it is broadcast regularly on television.

I did my inaugural professorial lecture (we still have that convention in Jamaica) in Jamaican, and I called it “Professing Slackness: Language, Authority and Power Within the Academy and Without.” And with that rather academic title I, then, proceeded to give the lecture in Jamaican. Now that thing has been broadcast a million times on one of the cable television stations. I went to the wharf to clear some goods and this woman said, “Me know your face,” and I said “I do little things on TV.” She said, “No man, you give a talk on language. Yes!” She actually told me, “You talk about that little boy in the schoolyard,” because it's one of the things I talk about. This little child was in the schoolyard, and the teacher stopped him and said, “Whose class are you in?” and the child said “Eeh Miss?” “Whose class are you in?” “Eeh Miss?” and she even said to him not to say “Eeh” because it is one of those nasal forms of meaning that come from Africa. Finally, she caught herself and said, “*Who a yuh teacher?*” and the child immediately gave the teacher's name. Now, somebody is going to hear that interaction and say, “Imagine! That child is in a class and doesn't even know his teacher's name!” He knows his teacher's name; he does not know English. So the woman could tell me that, and yet I have some of my male colleagues when they saw the lecture title—“Professing Slackness”—they said to me, “I hope you are professing tightness as well.” And she said she saw the program starting, and she sat down and watched the whole thing.

So this is part of the thing too. When we translate academic discourse into a language that people can understand, they will engage

with the ideas. But we believe that if a thing is academic, it can only be said in one kind of language.

One of the things I did was to translate a passage from my first book. When my colleague launched the book, he read this very complicated sounding thing with dialogic discourse and all this and said he wondered how that would sound in Jamaican. And what I did was I simply sat and translated the thing. It was so easy to translate from academic English into Jamaican, but I also gave another translation into what I call plain English.

And I believe that is a language that academics have not mastered—plain English—and I think the problem is that if they were to say (and I say ‘they’ to distance myself from them) what they were saying in plain English, people would say “that’s all?” But in order to have this kind of image of scholarship, then we have to make the language inaccessible. And I have a simple rule of thumb: if I read any passage of complicated academic prose in the middle of the day three times and its meaning continues to escape me, something is wrong with it, not with me—simple as that!

My question is kind of around the social problem issues. It’s a theory that sexual scripting is usually coming from popular cultural music, particularly hip hop and dancehall, and stuff like that. I just wanted to get your opinion in regards to the sexual scripting of dancehall, particularly for young females who are trying to negotiate safer sex and also protect themselves against HIV and STDs. I know that a lot of the information that you are giving us is more on an adult level, but there are a lot of kids that are still listening to the information that’s being passed down. Might their inability to differentiate as well as the lack of translation put them at risk?

When we translate academic discourse into a language that people can understand, they will engage with the ideas.

Very good question... In fact, we have a major HIV/AIDS project at the University of the West Indies and one of the issues is how to translate a lot of the discourse into accessible language. So there have been television commercials with young men saying that “I am waiting until it’s time” that consciously target young people. But the DJs themselves have also played a major role in trying to produce songs that speak to the issue. Buju Banton had a song about “put a rubber on your *willy*.” And Shabba Ranks had one. I even got into the fray when I was asked to speak at the launch of the campaign that the DJs were doing about a decade ago, and I decided to compose something that I called, “The Condom’s Complaint,” which I recorded. It was played on the radio. I also did one called, “Robin Hood *inna* Sherwood Forest.” I said, “Robin Hood *inna* Sherwood Forest/ Robin Hood don’t look so good/ Robin Hood *inna* Sherwood Forest.” And you have to know that a Sherwood Forest is a Sherwood, meaning a promiscuous man. And “Robin Hood *inna* Sherwood Forest doesn’t look so good,” means his *hood* not looking good, and everybody knows about his *hood*. I ended up saying, “I don’t want Robin Hood/I don’t want half a *hood*/ I don’t want a piece of wood/ I want good, good wood!” And that was played so much that I think people recognize that if you are going to get young people to deal with these issues, you have to do it in a language that they will understand and respond to.

So definitely I believe that conscious efforts are being made in Jamaica to target young people even though one of the issues that people had was that little girls—three and four—were singing “*Tek Buddy Gyal*.” And you know, we forget thinking about calypso that we’re singing about some of these same things. Admittedly, a lot of the calypso is more metaphorical, but you know, you were

singing about salt fish as children not necessarily realizing what salt fish was. But I think the children are more aware now of the sexual language largely because of the way in which sex is in the public space. So it's a question of how do children negotiate this knowledge so they can protect themselves. These are issues that we have to be wrestling with.

When you were talking about homosexuality you

tended to focus on male homosexuality, so I was just wondering if you had anything to say about the way in which dancehall addresses women who have sex with women, or if that was not addressed at all, and what your opinion is on that.

Some of the DJs do talk about it; it is part of the whole discourse of condemnation. As some of you may know, the Jamaican word for lesbian is *sodomite*, and *sodomite* is coming right out of Sodom and Gomorrah language. So it's again back into the Old Testament. So there is the same condemnation. In fact, I have coined the word "heterophobia" as a generic term for all of these fears of differences because I think essentially what we are seeing in the whole discourse of homophobia in Jamaica is people's fear of difference from what is seen as the norm, and "those people" are seen as outside of "normal" and, therefore, "terrible" and must be eliminated.

And, as I said in the lecture, the society is undergoing change, but it is very slow and there is this contradiction, as I tried to explain, that people are against homosexuality in an abstract way and they are upset with some of the practices. I must admit, I was amazed when I heard about fisting and the idea of it just seemed so... But my attitude is it's people's bottom and if they want to stretch it out, it is their business. In other words, this is my

personal position. And I feel that society is reaching the state where they say "it's people's business." But one of the interesting things is that visible displays of sexual desire are not even readily condoned around heterosexuality. You don't see people holding hands on the streets in Jamaica. So for our society that is so

sexualized, there are certain forms of public display that are problematic, and I think Jamaicans in general are quite

happy if homosexuals do their thing in the privacy of their homes. It is when it is brought in their face that they get vexed. So there is that double standard. And people know their father, and their uncle, and their brother, and you can't throw out these people. They are your family, but there is this public language versus the private. Some of the same DJs managers are gay, and their publicists are gay, and they are working quite happily with them and still singing these songs. It's almost like kind of a man protest that every DJ must have an anti-*batty man* song in his repertoire irrespective of his actual relationships with gay people.

My grandparents and my mother raised me on soca music, and they just inspired me with the way that they talk behind the lines and then give you a different meaning with everything. I'm wondering how you feel about the spillover; dancehall over into the mainstream. I would like you to touch on hip hop a little more in the way, for example, you say they attack dancehall as if it's bad, but it's telling a different meaning. And I am wondering if you know of any books they can translate so that the younger people can understand as opposed to taking it literally the way the mass media would take it.

I know that there are African American scholars working in this field. In fact, I was at Princeton earlier this month for a

conference and I went to the bookshop and picked up some stuff on hip hop because I see that there are parallels there. I tried to do a little thing in this book. I had a chapter called “Hip Hopping Across Cultures: Crossing Over from Reggae to Rap and Back” but it’s just really going over some of the ideas about the crossover and the way in which, as we all should know, hip hop came out of the Jamaican migration to New York and the role of Kool DJ Herc in carrying the sound system. So we can claim some ownership of hip hop. But some African Americans had their own traditions of rapping before that particular moment with the impact of the technology. So there is work being done. I can’t give you a bibliography now, but I would be happy to try to help you get some stuff. I think African American scholars, people like Cornell West, have been trying to do stuff. He got into trouble at Harvard for putting out a rap—“that is not what we paying you to do” kind of thing. He’s back at Princeton. I think that the scholars that come out of this tradition have a responsibility to the art itself, to try and see what you can do to make it accessible in other spaces.

People keep saying, “Carolyn, why are you defending this thing?” And I say, I am not defending it uncritically, but my interest as an academic teacher (I have been teaching at the University of the West Indies for a quarter of a century, it sounds frightening, I can’t believe a quarter of a century has gone by) is on black people’s creativity. I figure there are enough white people to study white people’s stuff, and there weren’t enough of us doing our thing and that is how I ended up doing work on Louise Bennett, on Bob Marley, those forms of popular culture. I just gradually ended up moving into dancehall, as I said, when I heard the music being played by somebody

working in my house. So I think dancehall and hip hop are producing the people who will be doing the kind of work you are looking for and it’s the work of your generation. You are going to have to do some of that writing yourself. What is your discipline?

Network administration right now.

Yes, so you have the technology. I believe some of the stuff now must be done through things like cartoons, and we need to use the technology that the young people are responding to, translate the ideas into this kind of means that they will respond to.

They are not going to come to a lecture, but you can use the technology now to carry what I have said and other people into a new medium. They will play a video game of two

DJs clashing, but they are not going to come to the lecture.

Correct me if I am wrong, but of the little I know about Jamaica a lot of people are Christians. If that is true, how do they combine that with dancehall’s obvious sexual relation? How do they combine the two? In Christianity sexuality is restricted and repressed.

Let me tell you, one of the most illuminating experiences that I’ve had was attending Bogel’s funeral. I don’t know if you know that Bogel was a very important dancer who got murdered under very dubious circumstances. Beanie Man’s name has been called, and Beanie Man says he don’t know nothing about it and put a million dollar reward for any information. And people still say that Beanie Man knows about it. *Me get it so me give it.*

But one of the most striking things for me at that funeral was it was being held at a

I figure there are enough white people to study white people’s stuff, and there weren’t enough of us doing our thing.

Seventh Day Adventist Church. That is my background; I grew up with the Seventh Day Adventist church. I used to attend Harvest Street Church here in Toronto until one day the assistant pastor told me that your very presence on the platform is repulsive; we don't have to even hear you open your mouth as we see you up there. I was seeing things like that, coming from England and calling themselves coloured, and I would say "No, you are black." It's that kind of thing. I mean, I understood where the pastor was coming from. And when I went back to Jamaica, I went to church for about a month and I ended up quarrelling through the service. So I said to myself, "if people are happy with the way the church is, if you are the one who is unhappy, why don't you just leave them, all right?" So I left.

The church has provided a space for a lot of these dancehall funerals because they are Sabbath keepers. On Sunday the church is available for funerals, so they have been having these funerals there. One of the funerals got shot up, so they took the position that they are not having any more funerals. But they were trying to have a dancehall funeral within an Adventist discourse. It couldn't work. You had young men going on the platform with their Guinness. You had girls giving their tribute and dancing and whining up. And you could see the pastor was now trying to drag this thing back into a Christian funeral. They had a sermon on the program, and somehow the Lord inspired them to drop the sermon, because I am sitting down there and I am saying, "How are they going to get these people to listen to a sermon in which they are being abused?" Because I knew the sermon would be something about "you people and your wicked ways," and, "This is time! This man is dead. Who knows who is going to die next?" You know, the usual funeral sermon. And somehow they were inspired to abandon the sermon, and they

went into a round of choruses, and what amazed me was the whole church was singing the choruses. All of these people at dancehall went to Sunday school. They know the choruses and know the Christian discourse, but they have chosen an alternative. I could not believe the passion with which everybody was singing these Christian songs. People dressed up in their *bling*, and their short skirts, and the skin exposed, but they knew the Christian hymns. So Jamaica is a very complicated place and this is what upsets me when people read it as if every gay person in Jamaica is about to be murdered. People don't understand. They come to Jamaica and they think Rastas are up and down the country, and they come and they can't find any Rastas. Where are the Rastas? And so there are these negotiations being made. As Capleton says, when he passes a church they are singing "won't be by water but fire next time/keep the fire burning," but then when him sing about fire, they want to condemn him. He says it's the same fire in the church. So it's manifesting itself differently.

In listening to your lecture and reading some pieces of your book I find that there is discourse with regards to the complexities, and we're complicated and it's schizophrenic, but there is still this huge dichotomy set up between labouring-class morals and middle-class morals, and the culture is presented as battling social spheres when I really don't think that is the case. I find that sometimes, and there are moments in this lecture as well, that the picture was painted as such. I think that even in dancehall culture there is a degree to which all classes intermingle espousing culture. It may not have originated in all of the spheres, but, in many ways, it is a national space and it's espousing, and not everybody is necessarily speaking. There are people within the labouring class, influenced through their Judeo-Christian morals, who are even more vehement about talking down the culture than people that are in the middle class. So I feel that that kind

of complexity isn't really brought up as much, and I just wanted to make that point.

Yes, but you see for a lecture like this you have to be somewhat selective, and I'm not defending my position against what you are saying because I agree with you that class definitely mediates and that people will go across social class. How do you explain somebody like Sean Paul? Damian Marley? People come out of different class positions and embrace the music, so it's there but many people in the middle class are still ambivalent about a song like "Welcome to Jam Rock." How could Damian Marley be singing this song when the tourist board is trying so hard to get people to come to Jamaica and spend their money, and why are we presenting all of the blood and the gore and stuff?

So it is true that dancehall, as I argue, is a mobile space that people go across, but it is still primarily a working-class space, and I think that some of the middle-class people who enter it enter it very much as voyeurs, which is one of the points that Damian Marley makes in "Welcome to Jam Rock." So I take your point.

One of the DJs that has a token anti-homosexual song was actually brought to court in England and his lawyer's chief defense was that the term "batty man" was not in any way indicative of homosexual activity but was a Jamaican word for child abuse.

Did he get away with it?

You know what? Yes. So in the sense that I understand the language to be fluid, but I also understand the language to have fixed meanings in places, my position is that if a word was used with a particular intent, it ought to be admitted and whatever repercussions that come with that

particular intent ought to be accepted because these are the ideals they choose to espouse.

But you would not make a good lawyer.

I know I wouldn't; that is why I didn't go to law school. However, I think that as one of the chief people in Jamaica that people look to when you are talking about what language does, and what language can't do, and how people translate from Jamaican to English to academic language, I found that there was very little, if anything, mentioned at all from anybody in Jamaica about that particular position. I think that when something happens in court and it gets translated, the next time somebody comes up in court and they get brought up on charges along those lines, using those terms, that's going to be the defense.

Let me just stop you for a second. I find that story strange to believe, I am not sure that this is accurate because there actually is a legal process in play now in the UK to get people to translate the Jamaican language specifically for court cases largely because a lot of people who are speakers of Jamaican were not being fairly treated by the state system because it was assumed that they were speaking English when they were not. So there is that thing. I hadn't heard about the lawyer trying a thing like that. Clearly, he is trying a thing. Everybody knows that is not what *batty man* means. But if he was able to dupe the British legal system to get his client off, you just have to understand that that is a particular loophole that he was able to negotiate.

Now the thing that you are saying about *batty man* meaning child abuser, now that is another issue because what some of the DJs are saying now is that it is not the homosexuality so much that they are against, it's the pedophilia. So that is how I can see them trying to narrow *batty man* to pedophilia, when, in fact, it is a broader

category. I've heard some of the DJs say this now and, in fact, they don't acknowledge that pedophilia takes place, men abusing girls. They have tried to find a politically correct way to represent their anti-homosexuality by saying it's really pedophilia. So that is how *batty man* got to mean that, in that specific case.

The other issue that I have heard now, Ninja Man—a very clever DJ—Ninja Man was on Winford Williams' program recently on stage, and he has never come out against homosexuals. He has never gotten into that discourse. Ninja Man's position is if I wanted to advertise beer, you'd have to pay me to advertise. So I am not advertising anybody for free. And his position is, every time a DJ sings against homosexuals, he is actually promoting them. And I think that our DJs would be better off just not bothering to take it on, finding other things to talk about. Because what it has done is really ruin a lot of their careers. In the early 90s when Buju Banton sang "Boom Bye Bye" I wrote a paper in which I said if a DJ doesn't censor himself or herself, somebody else is going to do it. I don't expect the DJs to listen to me, but the point is people who were saying this from long time; that you can't just sing these lyrics and not expect repercussions.

My point was just a larger issue of translation. When a language goes out into a broader sphere, and people acknowledge and try to use the fluidity of the language as it exists, how do we exert control of the language and its meaning so that a hundred years from now people don't understand a term to mean a dimension that a particular lawyer steered it towards for the sake of his client?

I think everybody would agree that the lawyer was just trying a *ting*, and it worked. To address the larger point you are raising

about the nature of the language and how we can fix it, *the Dictionary of Jamaican English* was published over a quarter century ago by Frederick Cassidy and Bob Le Page. They call it *the Dictionary of Jamaican English*. It's not really the dictionary of Jamaican English; it is really the core of a dictionary of Jamaican. But at the time that discourse or dialect of English was functional. I have asked the linguists at the University to update it. I said we need a proper dictionary of Jamaican—Jamaican where you have the words and you give the definitions, but also a bilingual dictionary. You get a lot of resistance still to taking the language seriously as a language, and it's our responsibility to do it. If we don't do it, when you go on the internet there are all kinds of Jamaican dictionaries—Japanese, German—I don't know how many of you know DJ Gentleman. Gentleman deejays like a native. I had him speaking at the University of the West Indies a few years ago, and when his manager came on campus he said, "Is this a reggae university?" I had to laugh because he wouldn't know how marginalized reggae is in the discourse of the university. I don't know when we are going to have a reggae university where we would see cultural production as a centre of what we do.

So you are right, that we need to hold on to the language, try to have some control over how it's represented because that is our intellectual property and we have to try to protect it.

[Applause].

You get a lot of resistance to taking the language seriously as a language, and it's our responsibility to do it.