



Inna di Dancehall

*Popular Culture and the
Politics of Identity in Jamaica*

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lyrical fusillades and bashment hype under the brilliantly lit scopes of the willing videographers who record their every word, gesture and gyration for posterity seem oblivious of the weight of social responsibility that has been thrust upon them by a society in transition. Instead, driven by a consumerist culture thriving in a free-market capitalist environment, they place more emphasis on their increased access to, and conspicuous consumption of, the symbols of status respectability than on their increasing impact on Jamaican society at home and in the diaspora. In fact, by its unconcerned behaviour and its pervasive, unstemmed hype, Jamaica's dancehall continues to expand and defy definition.

Defining the Dancehall



THROUGHOUT THIS BOOK, I use the term *dis/place* to impute sociocultural and political meanings to the dancehall space. The identification of this space as the *dis/place* provides a framework within which I locate overlapping symbols of power and domination and the ongoing struggles within the dancehall. First, the word “displace” is defined in the *Concise Oxford Dictionary* as follows: “to shift from its place; remove from office; oust; take the place of; put something in the place of”. Here, I argue that the dancehall *dis/place* operates as a site of revolution and transformation, effectively creating its own symbols and ideologies and negating, shifting, removing and replacing those functioning in the traditional sociopolitical spaces.

Second, I use the Jamaican creole term *dis* which is translated into English to mean “this”. In this usage, *dis/place* refers to “this place” that is, this existential place or space. In this instance, the dancehall *dis/place* provides a mirror of the lived realities of its affectors and affectees and acts as social commentary on the negotiations and relationships within and beyond the immediate space of the dancehall.

Third, the term encapsulates the sociopolitically loaded meaning of the Jamaican creole “dis”, a slang term used in both dancehall culture and broader Jamaican society where it is an abbreviation of the word “disrespect” and its derivatives. For example, “Da bwoy deh dis mi”

(That boy [man] committed an act of disrespect against my person).

Issues of identity and status play a key role in dancehall culture and its symbiotic relationship with inner-city culture. Actors, who are precariously placed economically and sociopolitically and who are intent on redefining their ascribed roles and claiming higher levels of wealth, respect and authority, by any means, are more defensive and protective of their perceived status. In this dynamic space, "dis" is translated as a perceived act of disrespect committed against an individual's status or identity. A "dis", whether perceived or real, usually results in retaliatory violence, which may be on a continuum from a simple string of loud curse words (badwords) to the extreme act of murder. Often, the reaction of the "dissed" individual may not parallel the seeming slight that has been identified as a "dis". For example, an unsuspecting man who makes sexual overtures to the woman of a highly respected don will often have to pay with his life.

Consequently, dis/place as used herein refers to "this disrespectful place where we have been placed"; "this place where we are consistently disrespected and mistreated"; "this place where we are consistently denied our legitimate human rights"; "this place where we are denied access to resources"; "this place where our identities are negated" and, even more importantly, "this place from within which we are forced to re-create and claim our resources, identities, personhood and self-esteem by any means".

Throughout this work any usage of the term dis/place imputes any one, any combination or all of the foregoing meanings, particularly where dis/place is combined with the term dancehall.

What Is "Dancehall"?

Originally, the term "dancehall" was used to describe a place or "hall" used for the staging of dances and similar events. There is no general consensus on how the term became identified with this form of Jamaican popular culture. One can speculate that the proliferation of stage shows and other staged events backed by the sound systems resulted in dancehall's identification as a music that is tied to a space and place. However,

dancehall music can be defined as that genre of Jamaican popular music that originated in the early 1980s. The contemporary manifestation of dancehall music culture is more than simply a composite of all music genres that have existed in Jamaica since slavery. Indeed, all genres of popular Jamaican music since slavery have been labelled and positioned in their respective historical, social, economic and political frameworks. While affected by and encapsulating elements of earlier forms of Jamaican music (for example, mento, ska, dub, roots rock and reggae), the music culture labelled "dancehall" occupies a late-twentieth-century cultural, political, ideological and economic space in Jamaica and has a definite point of disjuncture with preceding manifestations of popular Jamaican music culture. Because of its extreme manifestations of social, cultural, political and economic issues that are particular only to the late twentieth century, dancehall music culture is critically exiled from all preceding genres of Jamaican music culture. Like Rastafari reggae music, dancehall music culture may encapsulate some elements of the preceding forms of music culture but it simultaneously creates an entirely new form from a cornucopia of elements that exist in its contemporary space. In short, the label "dancehall" must remain positioned in and affixed to this late twentieth century space in Jamaican popular music and culture. The deejays, sound systems, stage shows, club scene and energetic dances are key elements that inform the foundation of the performative space of the dancehall and the lived realities of the dancehall creators and adherents.

Contemporary dancehall music and its cultural dis/place have become more than the sum total of the popularized lyrical output of its most prominent artistes, the deejays. Dancehall culture is a space for the cultural creation and dissemination of symbols and ideologies that reflect and legitimize the lived realities of its adherents, particularly those from the inner cities of Jamaica. Because many of its more prominent creators, artistes and adherents originated or were socialized in these poverty-stricken inner-city communities, the dancehall increasingly symbolizes the existential struggles of individuals in these communities. In fact, the dancehall dis/place is an arena for the creation, re-creation and dissemination of symbols that serve to legitimize and reinforce this lived existence and this is characterized by strong links to extra-legal and illegal

actors and activities. The dancehall dis/place is where its creators and adherents articulate and narrate their conceptions of self; it is the arena where popular and legitimated images of personhood are parodied and performed. It is "where we discover and play with the identifications of ourselves, where we are imagined, where we are represented, not only to the audiences out there who do not get the message, but to ourselves for the first time".¹

Although the deejays and dancers/models have historically been the most publicized actors in the dancehall, its adherents cannot be defined as a homogeneous group.² Based on my own research, I find it prudent, therefore, to outline some categories or typologies of heterogeneous actors (affectors and affectees) who operate within dancehall culture.

Categories or Typologies of Affectors and Affectees

I use the two broad terms "affectors" and "affectees" to outline the heterogeneous nature of the actors within dancehall culture. The categories and subcategories within these two broad headings each represent a composite of a larger identity group. They do not, however, claim to be mutually exclusive, nor do they purport to encompass all the identity groups and consumers of dancehall culture. As a matter of fact, there are significant leakages between these two broad categories as well as within the subgroups that make up each category.

Affectors are primarily creators of dancehall culture and affectees are primarily consumers of dancehall culture. However, because of the symbiotic nature of popular culture in general, and dancehall culture in particular, many affectors and affectees are simultaneously creators and consumers. Nonetheless, particular groups are either engaged primarily in the creation or the consumption of dancehall's output. Therefore, based on their level of creation or consumption, these groups are classified either as affectors or affectees with a line of demarcation between the two.

The Affectors: Creators of Dancehall Culture

The composite categories or typologies of affectors that I have identified are song creators, sound system operators, promoters/producers, dynamic hype creators, visual creators and deejays.

Song creators engage in the creation of the lyrics and the rhythms that form the foundation of dancehall music. It is important to note that many deejays (categorized in the following) do not compose all the lyrics for the songs that make up their repertoire. The creative licence for the rhythms and lyrics of the dancehall often lies in the hands of individuals who prefer to remain hidden from the public hype and bashment of dancehall culture.

Sound system operators own and/or operate the mobile sound systems that travel locally, regionally and internationally to provide music and hype for dancehall events. Wee Pow, owner of Stone Love, one of dancehall's most popular sound systems, is an important example.

Promoters/producers provide the economic backing and support for the staging and promotion of dancehall events, the promotion of dancehall artistes and the dissemination of dancehall music locally, regionally and internationally.

Dynamic hype creators are the male and female models, dancers and slang creators in dancehall culture. The dancehall model is involved in the dynamic creation/re-creation and display of fashion styles that inevitably affect the appearance of the consumers. The dancehall dancer engages in dynamic creation/re-creation and display of dancehall dance styles that are inevitably imitated by dancehall consumers. Female dancers usually engage in erotic and sexual displays as part of their dance styles. These dance styles are usually (but not always) driven by the creation of a new rhythm or song in the dancehall as well as by social and political developments in Jamaican society and the international arena. The slang creator engages in the dynamic creation/re-creation and dissemination of slang that is inevitably imitated by dancehall consumers. This slang is, more often than not, subsequently used in dancehall songs and is then picked up by sections of the wider society, especially the youths. Although one subject may function exclusively as a model, dancer or slang creator, others may simultaneously function in

two or all three of these areas. Dancehall's late master dancer and icon, Bogle (Gerald Levy, 1964–2005) is a key example of a dynamic hype creator. Bogle's consummate dance prowess, his dramatic style of dress, and his consistent development of dancehall slang and dance styles indelibly mark his passage through the dancehall dis/place.

Visual creators engage in activities that result in the creation and dissemination of visual images of the dancehall culture. This dissemination is both within and beyond the boundaries of the dancehall subculture at the one end and Jamaica's physical boundaries at the other end. This group includes two subcategories:

1. *Moving visual creators*, who create and disseminate audiovisual representations of the dancehall culture, including documentaries, television programmes, news clips and dancehall videos.
2. *Still visual creators*, who create and disseminate still images of the dancehall culture. These still images may or may not be driven by written text. These include photographs, newspaper articles and magazine articles.

Self-taught dancehall videographer Jack Sowah (Courtney Cousins), owner of Sowah Productions, is a popular moving visual creator, while photographer Horseman is a noted still visual creator in the dancehall dis/place.



The late master dancer and hype producer Bogle (Gerald Levy) poses inside Miles Enterprises at the weekly hype dancehall event Passa Passa Wednesdays, April 2004. Donna P. Hope photo.

Deejays/DJs are engaged in the oral performance of dancehall music. One should note that many deejays also function as song creators and promoters/producers. Deejays include several subcategories, a few of which are as follows:

1. *Girls dem deejay*: This subcategory is defined as the male deejay who chiefly engages in the performance of songs that focus on women and their sexuality. This focus may include heightened praise of female voluptuousness, sexual prowess, sexual fidelity, tolerance of male infidelity, financial independence, among others. Because of the heavy emphasis on overt descriptions and depictions of sex, female sexuality and sex organs, the output from this category of deejays generally includes a high proportion of songs that are banned from broadcast on the mainstream media and designated “not fit for airplay”. Examples of a girls dem deejay include King Yellowman and Shabba Ranks.
2. *Slackness deejay*: This subcategory is defined as the deejay who chiefly engages in the performance and dissemination of songs that are perceived and labelled as sexually explicit, lewd and vulgar. This subcategory may often, but not always, cut across the above category of the girls dem deejay. The output of the slackness deejay includes a high proportion of songs designated “not fit for airplay”. Examples include King Yellowman, Lady Saw and Shabba Ranks.
3. *Bad-man deejay*: This subcategory is defined as the deejay who engages chiefly in the dissemination of songs containing graphic descriptions of perceived violent and criminal acts, including illegal gun- and drug-related activity. The ideological orientation of this deejay is usually evidenced by his style of dress as well as his facial contortions and menacing body language during onstage performances. The bad-man deejay is often involved in behaviours and practices that are labelled deviant and violent during his offstage interactions. His output includes songs designated “not fit for airplay” because of the pervasiveness of threatening, ominous and violence-laden symbols and images in these songs. Deejays who fit into this category include Ninjaman, Josey Wales, Bounty Killer and Super Cat.

4. *Rastafari deejay*: A Rastafari deejay overtly subscribes to the religious ideology and world view of Rastafari. This religious orientation is usually reflected in the content of the majority of the songs which he or she performs and disseminates, the physical appearance of the subject (including his or her wearing of dreadlocks and Rastafari regalia) and the lifestyle of the deejay. This individual is differentiated from those contemporary deejays who adopt the wearing of dreadlocks as a hairstyle and not as an outward manifestation of their conversion to the Rastafari faith (that is, of sighting Rastafari). Examples of this group include Capleton, Anthony B and Sizzla. I noted earlier that while this category of deejay plays an important role in dancehall music and culture and is mentioned throughout this work, the category will not be discussed in great detail.
5. *All-rounder deejay*: This subcategory is defined as the deejay who engages in the performance and dissemination of songs that cut across all the foregoing categories without focusing on any one category. The all-rounder deejay often engages in various collaborative efforts with regional and international artistes and ensures the cross-fertilization of dancehall music and culture with the music and culture of related black diasporan cultural forms like North American hip-hop. Examples include Beenie Man, Elephant Man and Baby Cham.

The Affectees: Consumers of Dancehall Culture

The composite categories or typologies of dancehall affectees that I have identified are separated into gendered groups as follows: the female categories are Miss Hotty Hotty, Miss Vogue, Miss Thing and independent ooman/big ooman. The male categories are don/shotta, don youth/yute, freaky hype type and big man/dads/faada/heavy man.

Miss Hotty Hotty is a younger woman between sixteen and thirty-five years old. She generally hails from the inner city, lower-middle- or lower-class background. Her education is generally limited to the secondary level and she may be only functionally literate, but she is "street

smart". She is employed, underemployed or self-employed in an informal activity. Many are partially or totally dependent on a man for economic resources. Most are mothers and are unmarried. In the dancehall, these women prefer expensive hairstyles and accessories with brand-name clothing. Those who cannot afford the real thing will go to great pains to get custom-made copies of popular styles. Many of these women prefer tight, short and revealing costumes which accentuate their sexuality. They are all heterosexual and anti-homosexual. Many of these women have been popularized as dancehall queens because of their preference for tight, revealing, flamboyant costumes and their propensity to "skin out" and display their bodies in erotic poses at dancehall events.

Miss Vogue is a younger woman between sixteen and thirty-five years old. She hails from the lower middle, middle or upper classes. She is usually very literate and has completed secondary-level education. She may also be completing or have completed studies at the tertiary level and may hold professional qualifications or certification. She may be pursuing a professional career or employed in the corporate world. Miss Vogue prefers expensive clothes and accessories. She will often "dress down" in less flamboyant costumes like jeans and t-shirts while maintaining a costly aura. Most of these women have no children and some are married. Excessive displays of sexuality are usually avoided. She is heterosexual, but not violently anti-homosexual.

Miss Thing is a young woman between eighteen and thirty years old. She hails from the lower classes or from the inner city. More often than not she has made great strides in advancing herself economically and socially. She last attended school at the secondary level but is interested in advancing herself educationally. Miss Thing is generally a dancehall model, dancer or artiste or owns and operates a small business enterprise such as a clothing store that caters to the dancehall hype, a hairdressing salon or some type of cosmetology establishment. Most of these women have no children and they prefer to dress in expensive, flashy and revealing costumes and expensive jewellery. Many prefer to have liaisons with powerful and wealthy men who can assist in their quest for social and economic mobility. As a general rule, Miss Thing ensures that her car keys are prominently displayed at dancehall events. She is heterosexual, but not overtly concerned about homosexuality.

The independent ooman/big ooman is a middle-aged to older woman who is in her mid-thirties to late fifties or early sixties. She is often from the inner city or lower class with a few hailing from the lower middle class. The independent ooman may have completed the secondary level and may sometimes hold some professional qualification or certification. Tertiary education is rare. The independent ooman is usually self-employed or is an entrepreneur (for example, ICI, hairdresser, dressmaker, nail technologist or other cosmetologist, professional). These women prefer brand-name clothing, flashy jewellery, expensive hairstyles and accessories. They are overtly heterosexual and anti-homosexual. Many are in full control of their sexuality and often prefer male partners who are much younger.

The don youth/yute is a man who is aged between eighteen and thirty-eight years. He is usually from the lower middle, middle or upper classes. He has usually completed secondary education and may have some tertiary training or is either engaged in or plans to commence this level. Many are self-employed, engaged in family business, pursuing a professional career or attending school. A don youth/yute prefers understated but expensive brand-name clothing and accessories. He is usually heterosexual and generally less concerned with homosexuality.

The don/shotta is a man who may range between twenty-two and sixty years old. He generally comes from the inner city, lower classes or the lower middle classes. He may have completed the secondary level of education and a small percentage may have some tertiary training. He may be an entrepreneur or is self-employed in various enterprises. These include legal, extra-legal or illegal commercial or other business activities. In some instances, the don/shotta may have strong, partisan political linkages to the JLP or PNP. He prefers brand-name clothing and accessories and may gravitate towards the classy look of the formal three-piece suit. He wears conspicuous and expensive jewellery. He may hold a licensed firearm which he takes great pains to display. He is promiscuously heterosexual and violently anti-homosexual.

The freaky hype type is usually at least fifteen years old with no age limit. His socioeconomic background and status is varied but the greater majority come from the inner cities or lower working classes. The freaky hype type usually has some secondary education and a few may have

done some tertiary studies. Many of these men dress conspicuously in elaborate stylized costumes. The freaky hype type pays careful attention to his hairstyle and many of them sport fancy, complicated corn-row designs or some other colourful and elaborate hairstyle. He is clean-shaven and slim-bodied and pays careful attention to facial and bodily aesthetics. He often travels as part of a group that is responsible for the hype and excitement that characterizes the dancehall dance, club or stage show event. Many of these men are underemployed or unemployed and depend on a female relative or partner for their sustenance. Oftentimes, his elaborate and expensive costumes are gifts from family members who live abroad. Many of these men exhibit great prowess in the dynamic dance styles that are an important part of the dancehall. Since the late 1990s, there has been a steady increase in individuals who fit into this category.

The big man/dads/fada/heavy man is usually between thirty and sixty years old. His background is lower class or lower middle class and in some instances he may hail from the inner cities. He has completed secondary level and may have some tertiary education. He is self-employed, engaged in family business or pursuing a professional career. Like the don/shotta, he may have strong partisan, political linkages but this is rare. He prefers understated but expensive brand-name clothing and accessories and small amounts of expensive jewellery. He may hold a legal firearm and is promiscuously heterosexual and often aggressively and vocally anti-homosexual.

The related themes of gender and sexuality run through the foregoing typologies of dancehall affectors and affectees. During my research, the dialogue and narratives of the affectors and the actions, mode of dress and general orientation of the affectees underscored the dis/place's preoccupation with gender and sexuality as sites of identity negotiation in dancehall culture. This passionate engagement and its images are explored and analysed in the following chapter on gender and sexuality.