

Proceedings of the Ninth Annual Gilder Lehrman Center International Conference at Yale University, co-sponsored by the Yale Center for British Art

The Legacies of Slavery and Emancipation: Jamaica in the Atlantic World

November 1-3, 2007
Yale University
New Haven, Connecticut

Erotic Maroonage: Embodying Emancipation in Jamaican Dancehall Culture

Carolyn Cooper, University of West Indies, Mona, Jamaica

Available online at <http://www.yale.edu/glc/belisario/Cooper.pdf>

© Do not cite without the author's permission

I deploy the trope “erotic maroonage” to signify an embodied politics of disengagement from the Euro-centric discourses of colonial Jamaica and their pernicious legacies in the contemporary moment. Almost two decades ago, I proposed in my exploratory essay, “Slackness Hiding From Culture: Erotic Play in the Dancehall,” that the hypersexuality articulated in the lyrics of the DJs, which is conventionally dismissed as pure vulgarity, or “slackness” in the Jamaican vernacular, ought to be retheorised as a decidedly political discourse. Slackness, in its invariant coupling with Culture, is not mere sexual looseness – though it certainly is that. Slackness is an ideological revolt against law and order; an undermining of consensual standards of decency. In my revisionist reading, slackness constitutes a radical, underground confrontation with the patriarchal gender ideology and pious morality of fundamentalist Jamaican society.

Encoding subversion, the title of that early essay, taken from the lyrics of DJ Josey Wales – “Slackness in di backyard hidin[g], hidin from Culture” – celebrates the cunning wiles of slackness.ⁱ The subtitle, foregrounding the erotic, underscores the ambiguities of disgust and desire in the dancehall imaginary: feminised, seductive Slackness simultaneously resisting and enticing respectable Culture. As Peter Stallybrass and Allon White remind us in *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression*, “disgust always bears the imprint of desire.”ⁱⁱ

The dancehall politics I attempt to recuperate is embodied in the erotic, the signification of which extends beyond the purely sexual domain. I deploy ‘erotic,’ somewhat duplicitously, to define as well a generic, non-sexual bodily pleasure, manifested in the desire to live the good life, conceived in unequivocally materialist terms: Erotic movement as upward social mobility. This widened meaning of the erotic is encoded in the metamorphosis of Cupid, the Roman equivalent of the Greek Eros, from god of love to demon of lust. The *Oxford English Dictionary* definitions of cupidity are instructive: “1. gen[erally] Inordinate longing or lust; covetousness. . . . 2. spec[ically] Inordinate desire to appropriate wealth or possessions.” The notorious ‘bling’ ethos of dancehall culture.

The materialist values of the dancehall have their genesis, I propose, in the embodied folk wisdom of Jamaican popular discourse. For example, the emotive trope of the body as ‘soul case’ encodes both philosophical and political conceptions of incontestable human worth. The body encases the soul. The spirit is housed in matter. In the words of Damien ‘Junior Gong’ Marley: “Your body’s just a vehicle/ Transporting the soul.”ⁱⁱⁱ But Damien’s ‘just’ is not entirely *juste*. For it is precisely because the body transports the soul that one’s frame must be protected from exploitation. And the body must be dressed in the blingest of bling.

Most often, the trope of the body as soul case/vehicle is used in the context of the refusal to work out one's soul case for nothing; to be reduced to mere economic tool, especially for someone else's benefit. Societies like ours that were founded on the exploitation of enslaved labour do continue to bear the burdens of our terrible history. The enslaved, the "emancipated" indentured labourer and the modern, unemployed "worker" alike, all recognise their alienation from the fruits of their own labour. For a stubborn "hard core" of the Jamaican people, work must be seen as yielding reasonable rewards or it will not be done willingly.

Paul Gilroy deploys an apt quotation from Marx's *Grundrisse*, as an epigraph to his chapter on "Diaspora, Utopia and the Critique of Capitalism" in his influential book, *There Ain't No Black in the Union Jack: The Cultural Politics of Race and Nation*:

The Times of November 1857 contains an utterly delightful cry of outrage on the part of a West-Indian plantation owner. This advocate analyses with great moral indignation – as a plea for the re-introduction of negro slavery – how the Quashees (the free blacks of Jamaica) content themselves with producing only what is necessary for their own consumption, and, alongside this 'use value' regard loafing (indulgence and idleness) as the real luxury good; how they do not care a damn for the sugar and the fixed capital invested in the plantations, but rather observe the planters' impending bankruptcy with an ironic grin of malicious pleasure, and even exploit their acquired Christianity as an embellishment for this mood of malicious glee and indolence.

There are several Jamaican proverbs that give clues to the origin of what appears to be an entrenched, counter-productive work ethic that is the obvious legacy of slavery. For example, the wry proverb, "bakra wok neva don" [the white man's work is never done]. There is therefore no point in even trying. Work is thus understood as fundamentally alienating since the benefits accrue only to the immoral, exploitative "other." 'Bakra,' in the modern context, becomes synonymous with exploiter, whatever the complexion.

In circumstances where workers feel that reward is not commensurate with effort, very little energy will be expended. Thus: “daag se bifuor im plaant yam fi luk laik maskita fut, im satisfai fi ton bega” [dog says that rather than planting yams which will turn out to be no bigger than a mosquito’s shank, he will be satisfied to be a beggar]. And, “daag se bifuor im plaant potieto a pier-trii batam mek it bier laik maskita shank, im wi sit doun luk” [dog says that rather than planting potatoes under a pear-tree and having them bear the size of a mosquito’s shank, he will sit down and watch]. The most clearly evasive: “daag se im wuont wok, im wi si doun an luk, far im mos get a libin” [dog says that he won’t work, he will sit down and watch, because he must get by].

Conversely, there is a cluster of Jamaican proverbs that advocate the necessity of work, even in situations where the positive outcome of effort is not immediately evident. The proverb “wan-wan kuoko ful baaskit” [one by one, one coco at a time, the basket is filled] validates small increments of effort that ultimately result in the accomplishment of some fully satisfying objective. A similar sentiment is expressed in the proverb, “pieshent man raid danki” [a patient man rides on a donkey]. The ride may be slow, but it’s sure. A related proverb that advises long-suffering optimism is “ebri die debl elp tiif; wan die Gad wi elp wachman” [everyday the devil helps thieves; one of these days God will help the watchman]. There is an element of cynicism in this proverb that hints at subversion of its surface optimism. The daily efficiency of the devil seems far more predictable than divine intervention.

The passivity of the proverbial dog who would rather look that work is challenged in the proverb “lang fut a sunhat kyaan pie red herin taks.” “Long feet” – an image of idle stretching-out-of-the-body in the heat of the day – cannot earn the income required to live in an economic

system where essential goods are taxed. A related proverb is “poun a fret kyaan pie ouns a det” [a pound of fretting can’t pay an ounce of debt]. This somewhat ambiguous proverb can be interpreted to mean either a) you had better work to pay your debts; fretting won’t help or b) since fretting over debts won’t pay them, there’s no point in fretting. A rather pointed warning comes in the rhythmic “nonsense” proverb, “Uu no vii no vaa, an uu no vaa no vii” [whoever does not ‘vee’ will not ‘vaa,’ and whoever does not ‘vaa’ will not ‘vee’.] The structure of this proverb allows the substitution of a variety of verbs for the generic “vee” and “vaa”: if you don’t participate in the process you can’t expect to derive any benefits from the system.^{iv} Incidentally, the echoic structure of this proverb suggests a tradition of verbal play on which contemporary oral performers in Jamaica draw.

A rather “vulgar” proverb highlights the shortsightedness that temporary gratification of basic hungers can induce: “wen pus beli ful, im se rata bati bita” [when the cat’s belly is full, he says that the backside of the rat is bitter.] Note, again, the word play in “rata bati bita;” the meaning of the proverb is reinforced by sound vibes. The identical sentiment is expressed in the following proverb “wen man beli ful, im bruk pat” [“when a man’s belly is full, he breaks the pot”]. The euphoria of satisfaction in the present can make one forget the cyclical nature of human need.

The competing value systems that are embedded in proverbs articulate the variable wisdom of communal experience. It is not only one proverb that tells the truth of a people. Mutually contradictory proverbs altogether tell the history of a people’s struggle to find strategies of survival in contexts where effort is often insufficiently rewarded, and no effort at all can yield surprising results. After all “pus an daag doan av di siem lok” [the cat and the dog

don't have the same fortune].

A classic articulation of the dancehall philosophy of erotic movement conceived as upward social mobility is Buju Banton's commanding "Driver," from the CD, appropriately entitled *Too Bad*. Acknowledging the marijuana trade as an engine of material prosperity, Buju dispatches a compliant Driver to "[d]rop this Arizona roun[d] a Albermarle."^v Trafficking is a hustle that enables many youths to escape the soul-destroying deprivations of ghetto life:

Jamaican:

I deh pon a mission, man hustling hard

No ghetto youth should ever suffer an starve

Hustling ability we learn dat a yard

English:

I'm on a mission, and I'm hustling hard

No ghetto youth should ever suffer and starve

The ability to hustle, we've learnt that at home

This particular hustling mission in the marijuana trade is reminiscent of the trajectory of Ivanhoe Martin in the foundational Jamaican feature film, *The Harder They Come*. In Michael Thelwell's novelisation of the film, the protagonist discovers the true value of the trade in a disturbing exchange with his girlfriend, Elsa:

Jamaican:

"Look, Ivan!"

"Umm wha'? Whe' you a wake me up for?"

"Paper say police in Miami hol' a plane load down wid ganja. Dem say is here is

come from too.”

Is like ants tek de bed y’know, de way Ivan leap up an’ snatch de paper.

“Look yah, street value seven ‘undred t’ousan’ dollar!” That wake ‘im up fully.

He stared at her like a madman. “You hear ah say, seven ‘undred t’ousan’ dollar to raas? A soon come. Whe’ me pants?”^{vi}

English:

“Look, Ivan!”

“Huh? What? Why did you wake me up?”

“The newspaper says that police in Miami held a plane loaded down with ganja.

They also said it came from here.”

Ivan jumped up and snatched the paper as if, all of a sudden, there were ants in the bed.

“See this, street value seven hundred thousand dollars!” That woke him up fully.

He stared at her like a madman. “Did you hear what I said, seven hundred thousand dollars? Damn. I’ll soon be back. Where are my pants?”

Ivan, rushing out to interrogate Jose, his facilitator in the trade, exclaims incredulously:

“Seven hundred t’ousan’ dollah! Who a get dat eh? An’ we a run from soldier an gunshot every day? Fe what? Small change” (331) “Seven hundred thousand dollars! Who is getting that eh? And we have to be running from soldiers and gunshots every day? For what? Small change.” In “Driver,” Buju, too, acknowledges the scale of the marijuana trade and the fortunes it generates in the line: “A ounce dem a buy when a tons man a ship” [It’s being sold by the ounce and shipped by the ton].”

In Ivan's terms, he's being paid by the ounce while others are benefitting by the ton. It is his refusal to work out his soul case for small change that makes Ivan uncompromisingly declare, "I'd raddah [rather] be a free man in mah [my] grave/ dan living as a puppet or a slave" (281). Ivan's apotheosis to outlaw culture hero, like Jimmy Cliff's rise to super stardom as his reincarnation, is the victory of the growling under-dog that dares to bite back.

More than three decades later, Ivan's philosophical musings about the meaning of reggae are just as applicable to contemporary dancehall:

It seemed to [Ivan] a sign and a promise, a development he had been waiting for without knowing it. This reggae business – it was the first thing he'd seen that belonged to the youth and to the sufferahs. It was roots music, dread music, their own. It talked about no work, no money, no food, about war an' strife in Babylon, about depression, and lootin' an' shootin', things that were real to him. . . . He had heard stories of poor boys who were singing this new music, cutting records and becoming star-boys. That excited him as much as the music did. (221-22)

Buju Banton, himself a 'star boy,' chants the aspirations of a whole generation of ghetto youth in "Driver." The DJ identifies two expectations that will be fulfilled with the returns from this particular mission in which all his lifesavings are invested. The first is the satisfaction of the perennial Jamaican ambition to upgrade the infrastructure of one's house: "Mi waan change mi zinc an put up decramastic"^{vii} [I want to change my zinc roof to decramastic tiles]. Zinc has long been seen as a sign of impoverishment, though in a hierarchical culture of deprivation, zinc is not the lowest rung on the ladder of roofing materials. The traditional thatch roof has a lower social status although it can also signify up-market folksiness in leisure architecture such as the gazebo.

"Decramastic" is the brand name of a stone-coated metal roofing tile. But in a familiar pattern of semantic generalisation, it has become the generic name for all metal roofing tiles.^{viii}

A current newspaper ad for another brand, Decra, highlights the durability of the tiles in hurricane conditions: “Decra Metal Roofing Tiles have been weathering the storms since 1972. From hurricane Gilbert to Ivan through to Emily they’ve always come out ‘on top’.”^{ix} In the ad, a personified storm threateningly boasts, “Here I come again.” The Decra roof coyly retorts, “I’m always prepared!” Like a good girl guide. Conversely, zinc is particularly vulnerable to hurricane force winds, sometimes faring considerably worse than thatched roofs.

The other motivation for the Driver’s drug run fortuitously couples both the narrow, sexual definition of the erotic and my widened application, signalling cupiditous upward social mobility: “A business man a run, mi no inno no ‘but’ nor ‘because’/ My gyal waan wear Victoria Secret drawers” [It’s a business I’m running, I don’t want any excuses/ My girlfriend wants to wear Victoria’s Secret panties.”^x The drawn out vowel sound of Buju’s Jamaican Creole pronunciation of the English “drawers” – jraaz – connotes the ‘spread out,’ erotic body language of the dancehall. It is a far cry from the Victoria’s Secret discourse of faux-prudish sexiness.

I visited the company’s website to see if I could confirm my recollection of the significance of the Victoria’s Secret brand name: Queen Victoria’s improbable secret passion for erotic underwear. No such luck. But I did discover the many ways in which the company is exploiting its brand. It’s not just drawers. There’s Victoria’s Secret Beauty: “For every aspect of beauty care ... from sensual fragrance, sexy body care, and hip color cosmetics, to sleek signature pink-on-pink cosmetic cases.” Then there’s Victoria’s Secret Hosiery Boutiques: “An amazing selection of legwear, bodywear, and shapewear. Choose from the chicest everyday hosiery and slimming bodywear to the sexiest items for evening and beyond.” Could

'shapewear' be the old-fashioned girdle?

Buju's assertion of his need to be able to keep his girl-friend in the style to which she aspires signals yet another aspect of dancehall philosophy which has its origins in Jamaican folk wisdom. A number of Jamaican proverbs suggest 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-head^{xi} in a barrel, him can go pick wife.
4. When pocket full, and bankra^{xii} full, woman laugh.
5. Cutacoo^{xiii} full, woman laugh.
6. Woman and wood, and woman and water, and woman and money never quarrel.^{xiv}
7. You must find a place to put your head before you find a hole to put your hood.

In an urban, dancehall updating of this folk wisdom, Shabba Ranks' "Flesh Axe" asserts the woman's desire for both money and sex. Using agricultural, legal and mechanical imagery, Shabba compares the body of woman to valuable property – land that must be cleared, seeded and watered. I know that some will object to the 'commodifying' analogy. But in an agricultural economy that has long deprived small farmers of access to arable land, this earthy metaphor signifies the high value that is placed on the fertile body of woman. Furthermore, the vigorous metaphor of chopping the body land, which may sound disturbingly sado-masochistic to some ears, is a vivid sexual metaphor celebrating the efficiency of the phallic axe

as it clears the ground for the planting of the seed. The hard labour of field work is thus transmuted into pleasurable sexual work:

Jamaican:

Flesh axe

Di land pon di body fi chop

Is like money an woman sign a contract

If yu a deal wid a woman fi a natural fact

Is not seh dat she a sell her body

Fi run it hot

But every woman need mega cash

Fi buy pretty shoes an pretty frock

Woman love model an dem love fi look hot

She can't go pon di road a look like job lot

Every woman a go call her riff-raff

Look like a old car mash up an crash^{xv}

English:

Flesh axe

The body-land must be cleared

It's as though money and woman have signed a contract

If you're really going to deal with a woman

It's not that she's actually selling her body

And it's running at high speed

But every woman needs big bucks
To buy pretty shoes and pretty dresses
Women love to show off and they love to look hot
She can't go out on the road looking like job lot goods
Every woman is going to call her riff-raff
Looking like an old car all smashed and crashed

Given the historical context of exploitation of human resources in Jamaica – and the dogged resistance to this process – it is quite easy to understand why so many Jamaican youths now aspire to become DJs. The dancehall is a social and economic space in which effort can be abundantly rewarded. With raw talent and the efficient marketing skills of a sophisticated music industry, spectacular success is, indeed, possible. Those who would dismiss the dancehall and its culture of “vulgar” materialism as a regression to a dark past of primitivism need to test the continuing viability of the alternative career options that Jamaican society offers aspiring youth. With limited economic resources to ensure upward social mobility, very few will make it legally. In these circumstances, the international success of a Buju Banton, Bounty Killa, Lady Saw – and so many others – is a hard act to parody.

Beyond all reasonable expectations, the globalisation of Jamaican dancehall culture, with its irrepressible bling aesthetics and politics does, indeed, signify the emancipation of its primary agents from historical roles of oppression. Admittedly, raw musical talent is still subject to exploitation, given the capitalist imperatives of the international recording industry in which local practitioners are all implicated. Nevertheless, Jamaican dancehall culture is an exemplary site of contestation in which “maroonage” and its obverse, “accommodation,” classic psycho-

political responses to the brutality of plantation life, now constitute varying modes of embodied resistance to the manifestations of the far-reaching legacies of slavery in contemporary Jamaica.

ⁱ Josey Wales, "Culture a Lick," Jammy's, 1988.

ⁱⁱ Peter Stallybrass and Allon White, *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression*, Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1986, 191.

ⁱⁱⁱ Damien 'Junior Gong' Marley "It Was Written," Track 3, *Halfway Tree*, Motown Records, 4742-2, 2001.

^{iv} Vivien Morris-Brown, *The Jamaica Handbook of Proverbs*, Mandeville, Jamaica: Island Heart Publishers, 1993, 95, interprets the proverb this way: "Those who do not contribute, are not entitled to the ben[e]fits. Or, who does no work does not deserve to eat, or be paid."

^v Buju Banton, "Driver A," Track 11, *Too Bad*, GGM004, Gargamel Music, 2006.

^{vi} Michael Thelwell, *The Harder They Come*, New York: Grove Press, 1980, 330. Subsequent references cited in text.

^{vii} Buju Banton, "Driver A," Track 11, *Too Bad*, GGM004, Gargamel Music, 2006.

^{viii} I am indebted to Mr. Dane McKay, Technical Sales Representative at Quality Dealers Roofing, for this clarification.

^{ix} *The Sunday Gleaner*, June 10, 2007, A5.

^x Buju Banton, "Driver A," Track 11, *Too Bad*, GGM004, Gargamel Music, 2006.

^{xi} The rootstock or rhizome of the coco plant as distinct from the tuber, which is a coco." *Dictionary of Jamaican English*.

^{xii} A basket, normally larger than the 'cutacoo.'

^{xiii} A field-basket used by hunters and cultivators.

^{xiv} Here literal "firewood" which denotes material prosperity becomes a metaphor for the erect penis – 'wood' as 'hood.'

^{xv} Shabba Ranks, "Flesh Axe," Track 7, *As Raw as Ever*, Sony, 468102 2, 1991.