



Fabricating Identities: Survival and the Imagination in Jamaican Dancehall Culture

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Introduction

An assessment of recent work on Jamaican dancehall culture reveals the absence of any systematic analysis of the role that fashion and adornment play in the culture. This is surprising given that fashion is a prominent and constitutive part of the culture *and* the site for vigorous debate about lower-class women's morality and sexuality in Jamaica. This failure can only be attributed to the fact that analyses of dancehall culture have generally focused on lyrical content, the sound system and the economic production of music (Stolzoff 2000; Cooper 1993a). I suggest that underlying this focus is the implicit assumption that music equates

with interiority, language and “deep” meaning. In contrast, adornment and fashion are considered to elude or even destroy meaning. Therefore, to invest energy on adornment conjures up images of superficial, transient and frivolous activities undertaken only by women (Polhemus 1988; Tseëlon 1997), in contrast to the serious male world of ideas connoted by music production. While undeniably significant for a critical analysis of dancehall culture, a continued over-emphasis on music and lyrical content, to the neglect of other aspects of the culture, unwittingly privileges the activities of men and their interpretation of the culture to the exclusion of women.¹

In this article, I want to shift attention away from lyrical content and a specific focus on Dancehall culture to examine the embodied practices that emerged in the late 1980s to the end of the 1990s in Jamaica. I argue that working-class Black women in Jamaica use fashion to fabricate a space for the presentation of self-identity and assertion of agency. Through adornment, dancehall women have been able to address creatively the anxiety, violence and joy of daily life. At the same time, they have been able to register historical, cultural, economic and technological changes through their bodies (Beward 1994). Prior to speech or any written manifesto, different modes of adornment are employed to contest society’s representation of and expectation about lower-class leisure activity, morality and sexual expression. In a nutshell, fashion allows dancehall women² to challenge the patriarchal, class-based and (Christian and Rastafarian) puritanical logic operating in Jamaica. Of course, the wider context in which this articulation of social relations has taken place is that of socio-political and economic realities which includes continued anti-black racism, black nationalism and global cultural and economic restructuring. In this sense, far from fashion being meaningless, superficial and unworthy of cultural analysis, it allows working-class black women to invest their everyday lived realities with multiple meanings and processes which links them to both the spectacular fetishism of global consumerism and mass media semiosis as well as the African love of ceremonial pomp and pageantry.

The fact that dancehall women most often do not consciously adhere to this critical position in their speech, nor readily perceive their action as jamming the hegemonic syntax, is quite beside the point.³ Phenomenology teaches us that there is often a gap between intentional action and explicit, self-aware interpretation (Tseëlon 1997). Far from imputing a kind of rational, contestive voluntarism to dancehall women, I suggest that the significance and meaning of their action as a form of contestation is not always available for self-articulation. As such, my account and interpretation of the meaning of fashion and adornment in the culture is not wholly circumscribed by empirical enquiry into conscious explanation, speech acts, or verbalized discourse. Rather, my analysis is based on *both* empirical engagement and my own analysis of the expressive body in the culture. This body, its desires and perceptions are

seldom fully disclosed within speech; rather, they are made manifest in a variety of bodily practices.

Changing Times, Changing Styles

Fashion styles are always embodied and situated phenomena, reflecting and embodying social and historical changes. Prosperity, crisis and social upheaval are stitched into the fabric of every epoch. For example, the extraordinary wealth of Renaissance Europe was materially layered into the ornate and elaborate detailing of upper-class clothing. In contrast, in its rejection of the sumptuous and colourful style of the *ancien régime*, post-revolution France adopted a less ostentatious and simple cut in order to reflect newfound freedom (Breward 1994; Connerton 1989). Fashion and bodily practices became a crucial site to both express wealth in the one case and challenge old hierarchies in the other.

Among New World Africans, fashion and bodily practices have also absorbed and expressed key symbolic functions. Starting from the long revolution fomented in the hold of the slave ship, when the enslaved cut their hair into elaborate designs (Mintz and Price 1976) and reaching its apogee in the Black Power movement of the 1970s, bodily practices were as important as political manifestos in the struggle for freedom, agency and assertion of cultural identity. The “natural” Afro hairstyle, dashiki, large-hooped earrings, psychedelic skirts and patchwork miniskirts of the 1960s and 1970s signalled a rejection of European aesthetics. Fashion styles visually represented and extended the ideological affirmation and valorization of blackness and Africanity in circulation during the period. Like their North American counterparts, many Jamaicans adopted Africanized textiles, kaftans and long flowing brightly coloured majestic robes, head-wraps and jewellery made from natural materials such as seashells. However, during this period, the most important challenge to the aesthetic and ethical sensibilities of the Jamaican elite came in the form of Reggae music and the wearing of dreadlocks. Many Rastafarians and Reggae fans adopted dreadlocks and the military uniform of khakis and combat trousers. These motifs not only posed a challenge to the white capitalist and Christian ideology pervasive on the island, but they also drew attention to the permanent state of warfare that characterized life in the downtown ghettos of Kingston. Rastafarian fashion, in particular the wearing of dreadlocks, performed a critique of the dominant regime, asserting an alternative cultural, ethical and aesthetic sensibility in its stead.

In the late 1970s, the rise of Edward Seaga’s neo-liberal free-enterprise government heralded a new era of increased insecurity, violence and anxiety. This political turn gave rise to a corresponding cultural energy. Popular cultural expression on the island such as music, dance and clothing style moved away from the socialist, pan-Africanist

eschatological project associated with the Rastafarian Reggae of Bob Marley and Michael Manley's socialist government towards what appeared to be the hedonistic, self-seeking pleasure and excess of dancehall style (Chude-Sokei 1997, Barrow and Dalton 1997). Because the elite found it offensive and it was not initially given airplay on national radio, dancehall music was generally produced and consumed in the open air or indoor spaces designated as dancehalls. Dancehall music or ragga (as it is known in Britain) is reggae's grittier and tougher offspring, making use of digital recording, remixing and sampling while DJs "skank" or "toast" over dub plates (Jahn and Weber 1992). To the ruling elite, the music was considered pure noise, a cacophonous drone that grated the nerves. The lyrics were considered bawdy, guttural and sexually explicit. Finally, the elite considered dancehall (especially female) dress and adornment brash and excessive, reinforcing the view that lower-class Black women were sexually permissive. As a whole, the subculture confirmed to the Eurocentrically inclined elite the immorality and degeneracy of the urban poor.⁴

In contrast to this disparagingly reductive view, dancehall culture should be viewed as a complex reminder of the continued relationship between popular expressions, commodification, urbanization, global economic and political realities and historico-cultural memory. For example, in music, older Jamaican styles and practices were revived and brought into conversation with new digital technologies and global flows of information (Bilby 1997). In terms of dance, dancehall unearthed older Jamaican forms such as Dinki Mini and Mento. As the Jamaican choreographer and cultural theorist Rex Nettleford notes,

The movements in dancehall are nothing new; in my own youth I witnessed and participated in mento sessions which forced from executants the kind of axial movements which concentrated on the pelvic region with feet firmly grounded on one spot (1994: 1C).

Dancehall fashion fits into a general "African love of pageantry, adornments and social events ...". (Mustafa 1998). The African-American folklorist Zora Neale Hurston suggested that "The will to adorn" constitutes "the second ... most notable characteristic in Negro expression" (1933: 294). The will to adorn, she argued, is not an attempt to meet conventional standards of beauty, but to satisfy the soul of its creator (*ibid.*: 294). I suggest that the desire to "satisfy the soul" and project their own aesthetics onto the world is at the core of dancehall women's sartorial practice.

Dancehall fashion

In a society influenced by Christian Puritanism and the sexual conservatism of Rastafarian ideology, dancehall fashion has responded antithetically with bare-as-you-dare fashion. Unlike previous African diasporic youth subcultures, dancehall is unique in that women are highly visible. Although there are a number of prominent female dancehall music performers, women's visibility in the culture centers on their ostentatious, sartorial pageantry. The "session," "bashment" or "dance" is an occasion for visual overload, maximalism and the liminal expression of female agency. Women form "modelling posses" or rival groups, where they compete with each other at a dance event for the most risqué and outlandish clothes. Their consumption practices are largely funded through the informal sector, as hagglers (informal commercial traders), petty traders, cleaners, dancehall fashion designers or by having a "sugar daddy." Many of the outfits are designed and made by the wearer or by a local tailor. The style appears anarchic, confrontational and openly sexual. Slashed clothing, the so-called "lingerie look" (such as g-string panties, bra tops), "puny printers" (showing the outline of the genitals), Wild West and dominatrix themes, pant suits, figure-hugging short dresses and micro hot pants infamously known as "batty-riders" are favored. Revealing mesh tops, cheap lace, jeans designed as though bullets have ripped into the fabric and sequined bra tops became an essential part of dancehall women's wardrobe in the 1990s. At the close of the 1980s, the dancehall female body was wrapped in bondage straps and broad long fringes or panels attached to long dresses to accentuate the fluidity of the body's movement in dance. Incompatible materials and designs were juxtaposed – velvet, lace, leather, suede, different shades of denim, rubber and PVC, as well as animal prints such as mock snake, zebra and leopard skin, to produce an eclectic personal statement. Seemingly irreconcilable colours are combined to produce a refreshingly audacious, motile canvas on the dance floor. According to Carolyn Cooper, the sessions are the "social space in which the smell of female power is exuded in the extravagant display of flashy jewellery, expensive clothes [and] elaborate hairstyles" (Cooper 1993a: 155).

Hairstyle, make-up and jewelry are a key part of the dancehall look. In the late 1980s to late nineties, huge cheap and chunky gold earrings with razor-blade designs, as well as necklaces with dollar signs were worn on the ears, nose, nails, waist, and belly button as status symbols. More recently, the style has moved towards "ice" (slang for diamonds) and "bling-bling" (code for expensive jewelry and accessories). Hair is either dyed in bright colors or covered in metallic-colored wigs, weaves and extensions (platinum blonde, orange, turquoise, aubergine, pink). This style disrupts the Jamaican elite notions of "good" and "natural" hair versus "bad" and "processed" hair. In so doing, dancehall women

Figure 1
Batty-rider. Photo: The Gleaner
File



draw attention to the artifice of African hairstyle (Mercer 1987) and the way “black women exercise power and choice” (Banks 2000: 69). In opposition to the Jamaican elite preference for understated beauty characterized by lightly applied make-up highlighting flawless skin, dancehall women’s make-up is deliberately bright, glittery and brash.

Shoe styles continue the sexual fetish theme of the clothes: laced or zipped up stilettos, knee or thigh-length boots in patent leather or “pleather” are favored for their emphasizing effects on the crotch and thighs. High-heeled strap shoes that coil round the calves towards the knees complete the image (D’Elia 2002).

Disrupting Beauty, Class and Gender

Given the intensity of dancehall modes of adornment, the question that arises is how to account for the phenomenon, both in terms of the socio-historical context of Jamaican culture and dancehall fashion’s position within a global economy of signs and material flows. Here, I will identify three interwoven processes at work. First, I will point to the ways in which the fashion disrupts Jamaica’s elite ideas of black female beauty and norms of appearance, via an overtly sexualized paradigm shift towards what I term the “aesthetics of voluptuousness.” Secondly, I will show how practices of adornment in Jamaican dancehall are women’s response to a “limit situation” in which the issues that face them on a daily basis are issues of survival and keeping the terror of daily life at bay. Contrary to the conventional (Western) impulse to assume that limit situations necessitate a victim mentality, attenuating agency and expression in the process, I will argue that limit situations can stimulate the collective imagination to heightened states of intensity and excess. Finally, I will show how dancehall fashion is located within a network of global flows and exchanges. Rather than being a uniquely local phenomenon explicable solely in local terms, dancehall fashion demands a broader understanding of how both local and international signifying systems have been adopted and appropriated by Jamaican women, creating the distinctive aesthetic form and self that is dancehall style.

In order to understand the ways in which modes of adornment in dancehall work to disrupt existing conventions of the beautiful and express sexual difference, we need to appreciate the Jamaican upper-class perspective against which it responds. In Jamaica, as elsewhere in the New World, the voluptuous black female body came to embody upper-class anxiety over the moral status of the lower class. According to Carolyn Cooper, it is this body that became the site for “ongoing struggle over high culture and low, respectability and riot, propriety and vulgarity” (Cooper 2000: 350). Just as in late eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Europe, where a distinction was made between the modest and chaste (typically upper-class body) woman and the vulgar and obscene (working-class and African body), a similar bifurcation takes place in the Caribbean. The European upper-class moral ideal also operates on the island with an accompanying aesthetic transfer. The ideal look for elite Jamaican women is essentially a *white* look: slender,

restrained, calm, long flowing (straightened) hair and light or brown skin. The continued value placed on skin color as an important aspect of social mobility still exerts its own peculiar influence and particular form of violence on the psyche of Jamaicans (Douglas 1992; Barnes 1999). Although class is a critically important social vector in Jamaica, it is often articulated “through the idiom of colour shade and can reflect biologized notions of race” (Austin-Broos 1994: 218). Class, color/race and gender in combination constitute what Austin-Broos has called “Jamaica’s discourse of heritable identity” (ibid.: 218). This discourse perpetuates and reproduces the cultural logic of plantation society, where upper-class European values and morality have dominated the socio-cultural and economic landscape till the present day. It is the worldview of the brown or non-black elite which features most prominently in public arenas such as newspapers, beauty contests and television, and in the political and economic life of a country where 90 percent of the population is black. Lower-class black women are accordingly derided as vulgar, uncontrollable and dangerous. To the ruling elite, the protruding belly, large dimpled buttocks and thighs squeezed into revealing batty riders marks dancehall women as indecent, morally repugnant and unproductive elements within society. Writing in the *The Gleaner*, André Fanon echoes the views of the ruling class:

Dance-hall becomes a danger when the dance-hall syndrome is made into a way of life ... Dance hall ... under-develops our women who feel that they must learn to “wine” and “cock out” their posteriors as champion bubblers. Dance hall as a way of life emphasises the unproductive elements in society. If not channelled, dance hall will create a class of people which is incapable of doing anything productive. (1988: 14)

In their purposely garish coiffure, slashed latex body suits and flashy gold jewelry, the women assert their distance to and non-conformity with the sobriety of Fanon’s official culture and all that it represents: formal work and chaste morality. Importantly, these sumptuary practices mark dancehall women out as being unaffected by the lack and poverty that is a characteristic of ghetto life. According to Nettleford, dancehall fashion “all together spells for many a form of personal liberation from the strictures of a humourless existence which the hardships of poverty like the cloying satisfaction of affluence seem to impose on human beings at the opposite ends of the social scale” (1994: 16D). Dancehall women contest the association of material poverty with the inability to care and attend to public self-presentation. As one participant in the culture succinctly puts it, “I may be poor and come from the ghetto, it don’t mean I have to look shabby. A woman always has to look good even if it means spending her last dollar. Going to a dance is the time to dress up and let the world really see you as you are.” As Paulette McDonald

notes of another dancehall fan, “dressing up in expensive clothes sends a clear message to those who think that ghetto people are the scum of the earth: they can indeed set the fashion pace” (1993: 10). Dancehall attire suggests that without engaging in the arduous work of the formal economy, women in the culture still have at their disposal the money and creative resources that enables them to invest and participate in a fashion-based signifying economy. Rather than directing their labor towards the formal, bureaucratic structure, dancehall women work on their body as a ‘canvas of representation’ (Hall 1992: 27) so that the world can see them as they are.

Moreover, against the upper-class slur of idle unproductivity as described by Fanon above, dancehall modes of adornment should be viewed as a form of work in its own right—the work of creative resistance as a product of a playful imaginative and historical retrieval. In the context of a conservative and moralistic society, dancehall adornment invokes a visual subversion by returning to the subterranean sources of Jamaican folk culture, demonstrating a capacity to admit variation as a form of continuation. Of course, as I suggested above, this subversive historical recall does not necessarily conform to an intentional politics of conscious resistance. Dancehall female fans often have an unconscious pre-theoretical response relation to the ideology surrounding them, the variety of ways it is working through them and the responses engendered by it. As the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu points out, “It is because subjects do not, strictly speaking, know what they are doing that what they do has more meaning than they know” (Bourdieu 1977: 79). This unconscious collective agency of bodily action resists theorization in the language of conscious articulation. As elsewhere, the female body in dancehall perceives and responds in its own way to forms of affirmation and negation in the world. Through this unconscious collective response, dancehall women contest Euro-hegemony as it is manifested in Jamaica. Whether or not these resistances and refusals could ever be so well articulated in speech or deemed important is quite another matter.

Indeed, beyond being a form of creative labor, I suggest that the work of the imagination has as its goal the disruptive parody of the Jamaican class structure itself. From a perspective influenced by Marx’s theory of commodity fetishism, women’s stylistic excess can be decoded as class struggle by other means. The function of creative strategies of adornment in dancehall is to destabilize the field of class distinctions in Jamaica. It is helpful, in this context to refer to the work by Jonathan Friedman (1994). Friedman adopts and critiques Pierre Bourdieu’s analysis of distinction-making in order to show how the Congolese Sapeurs appropriate fashion styles (especially that of European haute couture) in order to disrupt the field of taste distinctions at work in Congolese society. For Friedman, it is precisely through appropriation, repetition and strategies of exaggeration and excess that the Sapeurs destabilize normative conventions of taste. By borrowing modes of

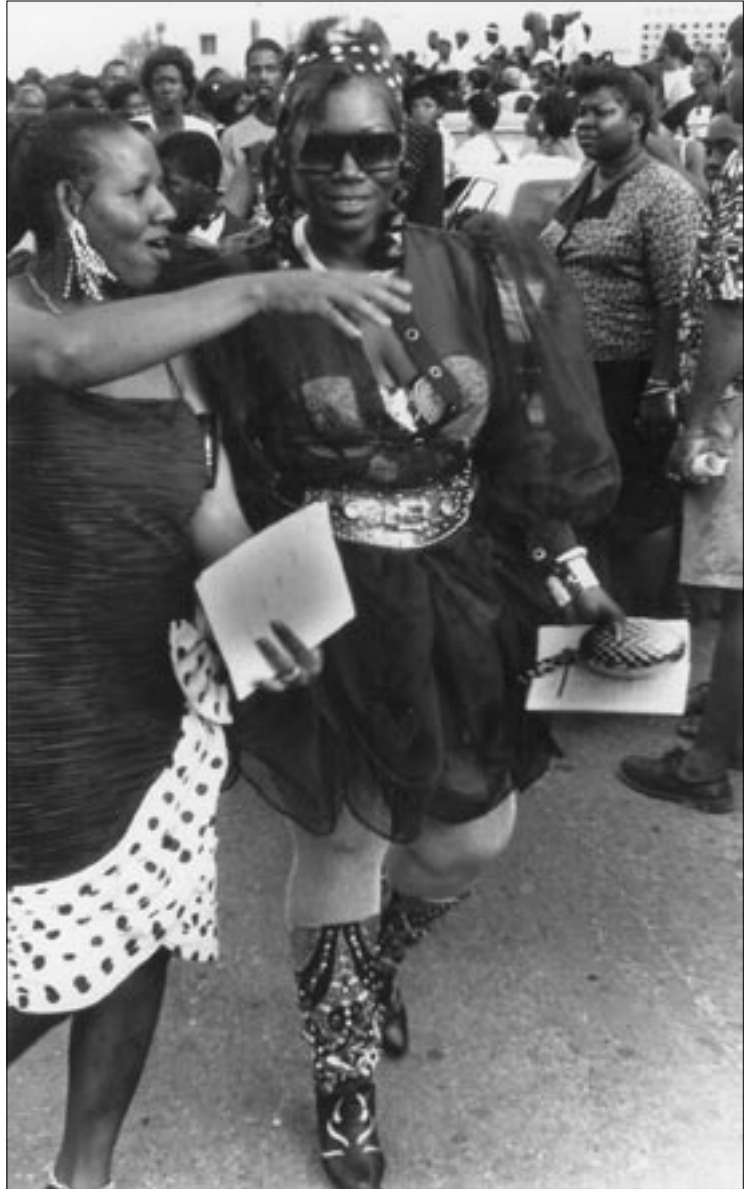
dress and aesthetics associated with the economic elite, the Sapeurs (who are mostly poor and urban dwellers) undermine the commodity fetishism and prestige value with which exclusive European clothing was previously invested. His argument therefore borrows from and exceeds that of Bourdieu. For the French sociologist, taste distinction occurs within a field—a horizon of differences that comprise the differential fabric of society. For Friedman, in contrast, the work of adornment among the Sapeurs tears at the social fabric of taste. In a parallel manner, in dancehall culture, a far more destabilizing dynamic is unleashed than that of simple social differentiation. Dancehall women are less concerned about being accepted by or assimilated within mainstream society, or to pretend to be something they are not. Again, they are not concerned to mark out a simple difference in taste. Rather, the overloading of the senses through sartorial extravagance works to deconstruct and jar the field of distinctions itself, through the exaggerated mimicry of conventional conceptions of feminine comportment. In a forceful response to denigration from upper/middle-class sensibilities and the Rastafarian restricted “mother earth” style for women, dancehall women dress to oppose every aspect of “appropriate” feminine comportment, appearance and conduct. Whereas middle-class Jamaican women tend to desire a slender and sleek figure, dancehall women rejoice in an unruly voluptuousness—the joy of being fat. And more troubling, slender women have resorted to using drugs, food and even hormones, the “fowl pill,” to get fat as described in one of Lexxus’ lyrics.⁵ In opposition to the Rastafarian chaste concealment, dancehall women revel in exposed flesh. Where both uptown and Rastafarian women value stylistic restraint (in terms of fabric, fit and colors), dancehall women value riotous colors and sheer maximalism. In this sense, the fetishized commodity of cloth in Jamaica, divided between elite, Rastafarian and poor urban-underclass sensibilities, threatens to break out of a rigidly Marxist perspective of class struggle to include a contestation of what it is to be a woman. Dancehall fashion is considered such a threat by the ruling elite that at the Emergency Department of the Bustamante children’s hospital in Kingston a “Dress Code” is deemed necessary to restrict dancehall aesthetic from spilling over into such an institution:

- I. Please cover all body parts!!
- II. Please attend to personal hygiene!!
- III. No setters in hair!
- IV. NO Dancehall Style! (cited in Cooper 1993b)

Dancehall culture therefore is the site of a contestation of both class and sexual difference, to the extent that neither can be reduced wholly into the terms of the other. While the aim of dancehall style is meant to shock and rebel against the upper- and middle-class and Rastafarian

Figure 2

Two women to don's funeral.
Photo: The Gleaner File



ethos, it cannot be fully understood outside of an attempt to intervene against repressive attitudes towards female sexuality, appearance and comportment. Drawing on motifs of deviant sexuality and symbols of excessive femininity allows dancehall women to express sexual power and affirm their own sexual objectification at the same time. By presenting

the fleshy female body as unruly and hyper-feminine, dancehall women show femininity to be a masquerade, a kind of mask. The question then arises about how to theorize this masking process and its intent. In European intellectual history, theories of masquerade can be crudely characterized in three ways: first, the feminist tradition, which views masking in terms of patriarchal scopoc economy which hides and stifles the true identity of women (Irigaray 1985; Mulvey 1989). Second, the psychoanalytic tradition, which regards the mask of femininity as covering a non-identity, that is, there is no substantive identity to reveal beneath the mask (Riviere 1986; Heath 1986). Both these perspectives view masquerade as absence, superficial, lack and negation. In so doing, they repeat specific assumptions about the relation between surface and depth, inner and outer, masculine and female. In contrast the third, broadly phenomenological, approach holds that identity is constituted *through* the mask itself. On this view (which traces its roots back to Nietzsche), there is nothing behind the mask, except yet another mask and yet another mode of identity imbricated within another potential surface. In this sense, the layerings that constitute the feminine are neither a hidden essence, nor a concealment of absence; rather, the mask is resolutely dynamic (see Karim Benammar). As one layer yields to another, identity-as-essence gives way to identity-as-performance. In this sense, femininity as a masked identity in dancehall is therefore both a performative and a generative space of being, where the binary opposition between the authentic and inauthentic has no traction.

It is important to remember that dancehall fashion operates within a patriarchal economy which positions women as the object of male desire and control. The extent to which the explicit celebration of women's sexuality challenges the power relations between the sexes is therefore limited. Dancehall fashion should, however, be understood as both an expression of female agency *and* the opportunity for male scopoc mastery. For Diane McCaulay, a contributor to Jamaica's newspaper *The Gleaner*, although dancehall fashion offends her feminist sensibility because it reinforces the image of women as sexual objects, she nonetheless sees it as a statement of female strength and agency. She goes further:

I have to say mostly, though, because I confess to a certain admiration for the outright defiance of dancehall fashion. Further, dancehall clothes cannot be said to promote feminine weakness; on the contrary, dancehall women are clearly not to be messed with. I am particularly uncomfortable with the inordinate interest shown by the authority figures (usually men) in the way women dress, and the quantum leap of ascribing national moral decline to the popularity of a certain type of female fashion. It is a very short distance from excluding dancehall from festival to not allowing it at all. Who is going to decide? Apart from who decides, how

are we going to establish what is unsuitable entertainment? What about carnival? Many members of the middle-class deprecate dancehall as obscene, while embracing the equally lascivious gyrations of soca. . . . But there is clearly no real difference between the display of skin and the drunkenness of carnival revelry, and the outrageousness of dancehall. (*The Gleaner*, 1994)

Dancehall women therefore expose femininity as a performative and generative construction that calls into question the Euro-centric and patriarchal separation between the Madonna and the whore, life and theater, real and appearance. The eroticized exposure of ample, black female flesh in revealing clothes thereby disrupts the patriarchal schism between the sexualized female body and the maternal body. Mary Russo (1986) argues that in Western culture, the exposure of the female flesh, especially the aging, fat or pregnant body, is seen as vulgar and grotesque, “making a spectacle of oneself.” It is precisely this kind of female corporeal spectacle that dancehall women seek to celebrate, as they reject and complicate the dominant reduction of female identity to a maternal or sexual binarism and the veneration of the slender ideal. With such self-presentations, the dancehall woman “puts distance between herself and her observers” (Evans and Thornton 1991:55). Evans and Thornton argue that this distance enables women to create “a space in which to manoeuvre and to determine the meanings of the show” (ibid.). Within a sub-cultural space that both challenges official discourse and yet nonetheless reproduces its patriarchal scopic framing, dancehall women have found a way to intervene through their corporeal styling. Through sartorial eloquence, dancehall women invite the male gaze only to fend off scopic capture. This is due to the extravagant, risqué style of their adornment, their dancing skills and the unsmiling, distant look, which can only be responded to with awed silence by the appreciate audience—both male and female. Therefore, what appears initially as sexual vulnerability or availability becomes a form of defensive armory in which the women assert their own subject position and an unwillingness to be intimidated by the normative pressures of a passive femininity.

Beyond aesthetics and a jamming of the class syntax in Jamaica, a non-European relation to embodiment and corporeal expression is at work in dancehall. Instead of restraint and a self-confining attitude towards the body, dancehall women call upon alternative traditions available within their culture. In this social space, women push the African love of ceremonial pomp to its absolute limit. The desire for full-bodied women in Jamaica is celebrated by the women themselves. Similar to the punk style described by Dick Hebdige and others, dancehall fashion exhumes an iconography of sexual kinkiness “from the boudoir, closet and the pornographic film and placed on the streets where they retained their forbidden connotations” (Hebdige 1979: 108).

Figure 3

Carlene. Photo: The Gleaner
File



This sexualized expression is taken to the limit, as bulky black flesh folds over figure-hugging slashed tops to exude an air of self-assurance and intimidation. This bold attitude and stance tempers the sexual offering; the “bad, vulnerable girl” image invoking a bodily confidence is characterized by masculine bravado. Here, we find a psychological

corollary to the explicit forms of adornment among dancehall women: a strident confidence that again seeks to oppose and disrupt the chaste respectability of the uptown woman.

Survival and Imagination

In addition to the extreme oppositional logic combating class oppression and the uptown normative violence of feminine respectability, dancehall fashion speaks of the edgy conditions in which many women in Jamaican ghettos find themselves. Here, we can introduce the metaphor of cultural energy. When a group is pushed to the limit of existence and marginalized from the normative centers of the production of meaning and cultural symbolization, the expressive energy that seeks output from the group cannot be released smoothly and easily. This energy builds up and seeks an outlet, like a blocked pipe. What often emerges between the gaps is an uncontrollable and uncontainable explosion of creative excessive energy, as desire transduces itself into expression. For dancehall women, the maximal intensity of their clothing, jewelry and hairstyle is the body's response to the existential conditions of their lifeworld: the noise, chaos and volatility that surrounds. The body transforms itself into an ocular symphony, an expressive machine competing via visual overload with the sound booming out of the sound system. The loud screams of their clothing, jewelry and hairstyle is a retort against the guttural tempo of the music. Sartorial excess emerges as a solution to a limit situation: what Jamaicans call "sufferation."

Women's over-investment in extreme forms of adornment in this culture is therefore an essential aspect of what it means to survive. Against the legacy of plantation slavery, global economic inequality, heteropatriarchal constraint, the violence of class inequality and religious conservatism, survival entails the transcendence of social death, through an attempt to overcome the horrors and anxieties of daily life. Survival for dancehall women means the attempt to generate meaning and sense in a context of profound meaninglessness and senselessness. In a context where class, patriarchy and color combine to create a unique blend of violence and erasure, survival finally concerns the search for identity, honor and prestige; the attempt to fuse the metaphysical, the spiritual and the existential in a way that allows the urban poor to "imagine an undominated fruition and to live within existing dominations equipped with a determination to do more than survive" (Simone 1989: 158).

Sartorial excess is the way in which transcendence (however temporary) from the harshness of life in the ghetto is imagined and manifested. Female dancehall fans may live under the threat of daily assault and opportunity-denying poverty; they are, however, the best-dressed poor women. Here, there are parallels

with other forms of sartorial baroque practices operating as a survival strategy in different cultural settings. The example of Sapeurs mentioned above is a case in point. Like the Sapeurs, for dancehall women, baroque stylization of the body transcends issue of style towards the fabrication of identities, whereby conspicuous consumption is an aspect of the maintenance of self. Friedman writes, Consumption is a life-and-death struggle for psychic and social survival and it consumes the entire person. If there is a fundamental desperation at the bottom of this activity it is perhaps related to the state of narcissistic non-being generated by a social crisis of self-constitution. (1994: 106)

The violence, anxiety and vulnerability of daily life are stitched into the designs of the fabric. The culture of gunning and knifing down opponents that characterizes ghetto life is visually woven into the sheered tops and the motif of bullet holes in jeans. This re-presentation of violence has the effect of both foregrounding existential reality and erasing it at the same time. In their reading of Schiaparelli's 1937 "The Tear Dress," Caroline Evans and Minna Thornton have suggested that by combining the motif of violence with sophisticated high fashion, "Violence and eroticism are simultaneously displayed and made to disappear; beauty is brought to bear on rupture" (1991: 50). Baroque sartorial practice becomes the very means by which daily violence is tamed.

This examination of the issue of adornment in dancehall sheds light on a specific but ingrained contingent relationship between the question of "survival" and that of the imagination, expression and identity. Here, we find a marginalised majority, impoverished, vulnerable and violated in the midst of an urban and spiritual decay inflicted ultimately by the abstract authority of Western capital and Europeanized class ideology. At this point, we are faced with a puzzle that requires something more than the explanation based on the model of cultural energy referred to above: how can this basic subversion of need in favour of an excessive imaginative expression occur in such extreme circumstances? The expectation is quite the opposite: that it is only in the case of material comfort that questions of need and survival can be forgotten, replaced by the bourgeois recourse to worlds of the imagination. In this case, how can this vigorously unique style fabricate itself within such a crisis-ridden space?

To answer this question, we need to turn the assumption that creative excess follows material abundance (and its inverse, that attenuation follows material depletion) on its head. It is clear that instead of emaciated abjection, dancehall women respond to their socio-political and economic plight through the multi-textural imprint of enculturated cloth. In a culture where appearance fixes and positions the agent according to a rigid signifying system, dancehall fashion and adornment actively contests and subverts the system of classification

itself. Instead of allowing the body to collapse or be rendered mute and inexpressive inside the anxieties of everyday life, through clothing the body is presented as a voluptuous, radiant transcendence of crisis. The “survival” at work in dancehall conforms to the phenomenological logic of the mask: instead of a fixed order of *necessity*—of the basic physical issues of need and demand—necessity is undercut by the performative subversions of desire and expression:

Among the “people from below” the device of “masking” (in fancy-dress) persists with a vengeance. We still have reason to devise masks to disguise, to create music to affirm, and to assemble dances to celebrate. The ambush of a less than just society under the cover of festive masquerades has been one way of experiencing control, if only a temporary one. Being King or Queen for a day was a way of having a taste for power, even if it was mock power and fleeting. . . . The actual dress is important. For the costume is a mask helping to transform the persona to do wild and uninhibited things—much tulle, dark glasses replacing the old meshwire masks the Jonkonnu characters wore and still do, sequins and costume jewellery, beads, baubles of all kinds, earrings (knobs or droplets), all reminiscent of the pieces of broken mirror on the fancy dress of traditional Jonkonnu! (Nettleford 1995: 16D)

As with the Sapeurs, survival involves an imagination that refuses to be flattened by the forces of negation at work beyond the frontiers of the ghetto. In this way, a truly radical transgression is in operation: dancehall bears no conformity with even the basic existential/social hierarchies of Western normative assumptions. Dancehall women live in such extreme circumstances—of crossfire, acid attacks, rape, spousal abuse, sole caregiver and negation—that fearlessness itself becomes the only mode of survival. It is the extremity of circumstance—the toughness of a life that has been pushed to the limit and is no longer afraid of death or pain—that enables fearlessness to arise. On the one hand, having nothing to fear can lead to senseless acts of violence; with dancehall women, however, it leads to a refusal to acquiesce to the pseudo-transgressive logic of the carnival which Jamaican elites find more agreeable, where a normative order waits to restore normativity behind the mask. It is precisely in this liminal situation that women finally can lose any anxiety over the social perception of their appearance. Instead of the fear of being called a “skettel” or a tart or seen as obscene, the dancehall woman dresses for herself and her community, without care for Jamaican uptown decorum and respectability

Global and Local Flows

At first sight, dancehall fashion appears to be strangely dislocated from the rest of society, an orchidacious sub-culture extruded from beyond the rim of mainstream culture. Dancehall adornment springs out like an alien life form complete with its own entirely separate dynamics of existence and taste, like fungi on a tree. Dancehall fashion seems to be the very antithesis of conservative restraint and the concealed style of both official culture and Rastafarian gender coding. It appears to be totally divorced from any cultural or historical context or continuity; springing forth with mutant abundance in a flash of audaciously colored wigs, raucous screech-screaming lamé and sequined tops stretched revealingly across expanses of black flesh. And yet, this dislocated appearance is deceptive. Closer examination of dancehall style reveals deep cross-cultural and historical connections at work in its constitution, demonstrating an attunement with a hybrid array of cultural elements.

In an age of transactional flow of bodies, information, goods, mass media and images, cultural eclecticism has become the only response. Jamaica's proximity to North America, with the more than 60 American TV channels that beam into Jamaican homes, combined with the large number of Jamaicans in the diaspora, means that cultural influence and exchange is the norm. Like their counterparts in the sonic world, dancehall fashion also favors sampling, cutting and mixing in order to give birth to something different and distinct. Dancehall women have raided the global wardrobe and given it local texture. Odd and incongruous materials, imageries, accessories and patterns are combined to produce dizzying and dazzling layers of material, texture and form. Plastic, lurex, polyester, lycra, nylon are combined with leather, silk, organza lace, velvet, brocade. Late 1960s hot pants ride higher into the buttocks to reveal more than its original ever did; English granny purple-rinse hair styles become an unrecognizable, chromatic sculptured coiffure on youthful bodies; the "cut up" and bondage straps of punk were cleaned up and re-emerged as the "air-conditioned linen summer wear" designed by Sandra Campbell; Vivienne Westwood's 1976 Bondage Collection was hungrily retrieved and stripped of its Nazi associations. Punk girls' fishnet tights became the now classic mesh string vest. Fake chunky 22-carat gold evoked the tradition of goldsmith's art that flourished in the former Gold Coast of West Africa, Ghana, denuded of its royalty and hierarchy and reduced to a kitschy repetition of the original. The bridal nose ring linked to the ear by a fine delicate chain connects dancehall women to a tradition of Bollywood-esque ostentatious display. All these motifs are emblematic of the way in which dancehall women have absorbed and adapted global fashions, goods and images, and inflected them with new meanings that have made them refreshingly and uniquely Jamaican. This is what Hudita Nura Mustafa, in her account of changing fashion in Senegal, has termed the "sartorial ecumene."

Sartorial ecumene refers to the “incorporation of objects and images of global origins into [local] practices and circulations involving dress and bodily adornment” (Mustafa 1998: 22). It is in the surface of adornment that the creative subjectivity and agency of women at the core of dancehall styling should be understood.

The fabric and cut of aspect of dancehall fashion has a direct lineage to the Jamaican masquerade tradition of Jonkonnu and “Pitcho Patchy.” Here, women are clothed in strips of material gathered together to give the appearance of a jumble of loose layers of fabric. This historical connection enables us to understand a key point about dancehall culture: that it is far more closely connected to the deep fiber of the Jamaican folk tradition than the ruling elite would like to acknowledge:

Old characters like Pitcho Patchy have their counterparts in contemporary dancehall. The best jeans (stone washed or plain) are made to look ragged with designer-looking patches of varying colours, with strategic rips or strips hanging like the organised raggedness of traditional Pitcho Patchy. (Nettleford 1995: 16D)

Female adornment is grounded in a dense hybrid matrix of borrowings and repetitions, creating a truly diasporic culture of excess that is at once deeply embedded within a Jamaican folkloric tradition and again a manifestation of cultural borrowing and exchange from outside. Dancehall fashion is therefore a historical palimpsest, providing glimpses into layers of other historical styles, traditions and symbolic systems.

Having prowled through the international circuit of goods and images and woven them back into the local fabric, dancehall women return them to the world of consumption for further re-stitching. Dancehall fashion has quickly gathered its own international crop of sartorial disciples who raid and absorb the aesthetic reservoir of global street-wear and turn them into high fashion, by changing the context and the price and investing them with a symbolic capital that was missing in the early incarnation. Stripped of its rawness and tamed to suit European high-fashion tastes, dancehall fashion becomes an object of desire that those who are scornful of dancehall (but secretly admire it) can now wear. This is later recirculated among dancehall style aficionados to signify renewed prestige and taste in a complex feedback loop of call and response. For example, as the 1990s drew to a close, dancehall fashion connoisseurs turned to the very couture designers they inspired. Moschino and Versace are favorites among dancehall fashionistas (with their labels hanging out to show that they are wearing the “genuine” article). The issue of “original” and “copy” in reality however have little importance: designs, fabrics and modes of accessorizing are inscribed within a system of incessant borrowing and dialogue to the extent that it becomes futile to fixate on origin. Which came first, Pam Hogg’s autumn/winter 1992/93 slashed latex body suit or the slashed t-shirts

doing the rounds in Jamaica around the same time? Are Versace's gold-encrusted jeans an original which the dancehall fashion aficionados imitated? The answer to these questions is impossible to resolve. The line of influence of any cultural artifact is often not obvious or explicit; in dancehall the line is a spaghetti sprawl of loops and curves. Origins and originals are the stuff of bourgeois distinction-making and intellectual property rights—elements with no meaning in a world where the distinction between fake and real has little purchase. Rather, the incessant appropriation, re-appropriation and expropriation of global/local exchanges reveal the intrinsic mutuality of cultural artifacts and patterns of expression. Through dancehall's sartorial borrowing and transfer, fashion is perpetually caught up within a dynamic of differential repetition that has multiple origins.

In this article, I have argued that dancehall fashion and corporeal stylization show how women inured by life in the urban ghettos of Kingston interpret their life world, inflect it with meaning and recycle the different cultural artifacts circulating within a global economy of sartorial signs. Beneath interpretation and a semiotic analysis, however, I have indicated that dancehall styling is ultimately a question of survival; an excessively imaginative response to the class, race and gender-based normative violence of the hegemonic morality of the uptown elite. I hope to have encouraged an appreciation of the ways in which, prior to speech and lyricization, women in dancehall culture exhibit an expressive styling that ultimately should be characterized as a defiant performance of generative identity in the midst of perpetual existential crisis.

Notes

1. This is not to deny that women do also contribute to the production of music as is evidence with the prominence of female dancehall DJs such as Lady Saw, etc. However, through sartorial practices a larger group of women can participate and contribute to dancehall culture. Fashion and adornment thus becomes a democratic space which allows different categories of women to participate in the production of symbols and cultural meaning.
2. Not all female participants in the culture dress so flamboyantly, however. Dancehall women therefore refer to those women who spend a considerable amount of their time and resources attending the dancehall events, drawing attention to themselves at any event through their fashion style which stands them out from the rest of the crowd. It is these women known as dancehall "divas" or "donnets" who have aroused interest, fascination and vilification all at once who are the central subject of this article.
3. During the fieldwork for this research it became clear that some of the subversive and transformative potential I attributed to dancehall women were not always explicitly shared by dancehall women.

Many pointed out that they had not intentionally set out to challenge hegemonic structures. Rather, they were simply dressing for themselves and the dancehall space provided them with the opportunity to express themselves. The gap between how participants understand and explain their action and my own interpretation of their action in no way detracts from the argument. It is important to remember that Jamaican women have a long history of resisting oppressive regimes and articulating their existential positioning using a variety of media. I locate dancehall women's sartorial expression as a continuation of this history of resistance and cultural production.

4. It will be true to say that Dancehall music and culture has now become mainstream, but its energy, creativity and reproduction continue to be drawn from the socio-political and economic realities of the marginalized urban poor. Despite being a major Jamaican cultural export, Dancehall still occupies an ambivalent place within Jamaican elite cultural imaginary.
5. In *Let those Monkeys Out*, Dancehall DJ Lexxus sings about the use of bleaching cream by dark-skinned women to acquire the browning effect, and their increasing use of fattening pills used in industrial chicken-farming to acquire a ample body is so valorized in the culture. A verse from the lyrics goes,

Me hear some o' them nuh stop take the fowl pill
MmMm, so me know she them gyal there skill
A take the fowl pill just to impress Phil
When you see them you fi shout, 'Dill dill'.

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