

Culture as Commodity:

Dancehall Queens and the Sale of Female

Empowerment

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Over the past fifty years or so, Jamaican music has become and continued to be one of the country's most important exports. Dancehall music, a style based on the use of sound systems and deejays, is today commonly acknowledged as Jamaica's most popular form of music, and coupled with recent trends of globalization has also reached a high level of international popularity. However, with this increased international attention, female involvement in dancehall culture has also come under increased scrutiny, as women are generally portrayed in a promiscuous and sexually suggestive manner. While current scholars on the subject have successfully refuted accusations of misogyny and objectification, and promote female participation in dancehall culture as a positive form of female empowerment and self-expression, I argue that new embodiments of female dancehall culture, epitomized within the International Dancehall Queen Competition in Montego Bay, are treating its female participants as commodities, using their sexuality to attract tourism and other forms of financial gain. By transforming these cultural elements into commodities, participants are effectively changing the original intentions behind dancehall culture, and are supporting the dominant local and global societies which they have historically sought to oppose. This paper raises questions about the possible dangers of globalization to authentic culture, especially to smaller more vulnerable countries such as those in the Caribbean, who have a greater tendency and need to rely on tourism economically, and thus the international opinions held about their countries. Additionally, it shows a need to distinguish between authentic forms of cultural expression and their possibly inauthentic offspring, as well as recognizing the need for different methods of analysis for both. Finally, I hope to demonstrate the importance of recognizing when and where a "gender democracy" might exist, and when and where there is a need to address gender inequality.

Culture as Commodity: Dancehall Queens and the Sale of Female Empowerment

Music has long been one of Jamaica's primary exports to the rest of the world. Although for most Americans the type of music that immediately comes to mind is probably the reggae or roots music of Bob Marley or Jimmy Cliff, in fact the most popular form of Jamaican music today is dancehall, which began to develop from the introduction of the sound system in the mid-twentieth century.¹ Historically, participation in dancehall culture has largely been drawn from the poorer ghetto populations of Jamaica, and provides an arena for the self expression of many poor Jamaicans in a society where they are generally oppressed. Furthermore, dancehall music has been seen to provide a temporary truce between classes in Jamaica, as an arena where most are welcome for the expression of a common taste in music, such as is the case with the weekly Passa Passa event in the Tivoli Gardens neighborhood of Kingston.² A notable divergence in dancehall music from the previously dominant reggae or roots music and culture, as well as traditional colonial standards, is the presentation of its female participants.

Female participants in dancehall culture are, by these Western standards, very scantily clad and promiscuous, and their dance moves are typically overtly sexual and suggestive. Female participation has also come in the form of dancehall queen competitions, in which women compete for the title of Dancehall Queen using their dance skills, dress, and personality, and are typically judged from within the culture by audience members or deejays. Most

¹ Norman C. Stozoff, *Wake the Town and Tell the People*. (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2000.) Stozoff discusses in much greater depth the history and development of Jamaican dancehall culture and music in general. He argues that dancehall is not a new phenomenon, but rather a continuation of the development of Jamaican music. While dancehall was certainly influenced by most other forms of Jamaican music as well as foreign music, such as jazz from the United States, I think the many distinctions between it and other forms such as reggae distinguish it as its own type.

² Donna P. Hope, "Passa Passa: Interrogating Cultural Hybridities in Jamaican Dancehall," *Small Axe: A Caribbean Journal of Criticism* 21 (Oct. 2006): 119-133.

dancehall queen competitions began as neighborhood or community contests, but today have developed into massive competitions catching the interest of the entire nation. Especially in the past decade, dancehall music and culture has gained popularity outside of Jamaica, especially in England and the United States. With increased national attention, dancehall culture itself is experiencing the impact of foreign influence, most noticeably in the interest of foreign women in competing in one of Jamaica's most famous dancehall queen competitions, the recently re-named International Dancehall Queen Competition. These new, larger, and more formal competitions are taking on new dimensions. Rather than continuing to espouse the cultural values from the authentic culture from which it came, this competition appears to be commodifying the culture for its own economic gains, specifically those of the male producers and promoters who have an extensive degree of control over the competition and competitors.. One interesting phenomena is that increasingly, Jamaica's International Dancehall Queen Competition seems to be becoming more and more similar to the Miss Jamaica World Competition, albeit with many differences in the women's comport and attire.

In this paper, I argue that while current scholars on the subject have largely understood female participation in dancehall culture as a positive form of black female self-expression and empowerment, modern Dancehall Queen competitions do not exhibit this same characteristic, and instead turn the cultural elements of dancehall into commodities to sell to the rest of the world, promoting the dominant Jamaican culture stemming from colonialism and Rastafarianism which dancehall culture has historically sought to subvert. By changing the setting and context in which this culture is performed, especially by females, the original resistance-oriented and self-empowering aspects of dancehall culture are being packaged and marketed to the rest of the world, resulting in the loss of the original foundations of the culture, and rendering many of the

arguments for female agency and empowerment made by current scholars inapplicable to the new dancehall queen competitions. Additionally, the ability to draw similarities between the International Dancehall Queen and the Miss World Jamaica Competitions is initially alarming, considering the high degree of sexual objectification inherent in beauty pageants to begin with.

Of course this is not to say that profiting from one's own culture effectively invalidates it. However, in this case, the creators and performers of the culture are no longer in control, but are being used by others as a profit making machine. In order to ground my research, I will start with a review of the dominant scholarship on female involvement in dancehall, following with a discussion of the Miss World Jamaica Competition, drawing comparisons between it and the International Dancehall Queen Competition. Next, I will examine the specific changes within modern dancehall culture, and the International Dancehall Queen Competition exhibited, specifically with regards to a turn against slackness and the increased internationality and globalization of dancehall culture. Next, I will discuss the actual setting and environment of the competition, and how this invalidates possible counterarguments stemming from the original scholarship involving female agency and empowerment in dancehall culture. Finally, I will examine the actual commodification of dancehall culture occurring with the intent to promote tourism and increase both domestic and foreign profits.

Past Scholarship

In order to understand what happens differently in modern dancehall queen competitions in comparison to the cultural roots from which it stemmed, it is important to understand the scholarship behind the argument that female participation demonstrates a positive form of female, and especially black, empowerment. Current scholars on female participation in dancehall culture have all come to rather similar consensus on its value, most seeing it as a

rebellion against dominant Jamaican society and culture. In Jamaica, poor black women are almost doubly oppressed, both due to their gender and their race. Thus, specific attempts at rebellion are usually recognized as positive forms of agency. Or perhaps, in the style of Walter Johnson, it is more important to recognize acts of resistance rather than agency.³ Historically, the presence of agency has been judged in terms of overt actions; however, because this scholarship came out of a heritage of patriarchy, it often left out women, as women have been culturally taught to respond to adversity in different manners, such as through verbal dialogue or sexual actions. Thus, for the present discussion, it is probably more appropriate to refer to acts of resistance, or resistance-oriented actions.

With regards to the promiscuous apparel and adornment trademark of these women, Bibi Bakare-Yusuf sees it as a method of rebellion against the restrictive dress norms of not only dominant society, but also of Rastafarian and roots/reggae culture.⁴ Bakare-Yusuf argues that fashion allows dancehall women to connect to global consumerism, and indeed the global community. Moreover, women are able to subvert the dominant culture, responsible for their past and continuing oppression, with this global connection. A specific example of resistance comes from the common dying and processing of participants hair, which directly goes against not only the simple and natural standards of the Jamaican elite, and the “mother earth” style of Rastafarianism.⁵ Another interesting concept brought up by Bakare-Yusuf concerns the dichotomy of the Madonna and the whore. The combination of the inherent sexuality of dancehall women’s dress, combined with their typically voluptuous figures break down this euro-centric dichotomy imposed upon women throughout history. Rather than subscribing to

³ Walter Johnson, “On Agency,” *Journal of Social History* 37:1 (Fall 2003): 113-125.

⁴ Bibi Bakare-Yusuf, “Fabricating Identities: Survival and the Imagination in Jamaican Dancehall Culture,” *Body and Culture* 10:4 (Dec. 2006): 462-483.

⁵ Bakare-Yusuf, “Fabricating Identities: Survival and the Imagination in Jamaican Dancehall Culture,” 470.

this irrational distinction, dancehall women are creating a separate space to act according to their own volitions and desires. This is a compelling concept that will be important to expound upon in my following analysis.

Carolyn Cooper is one of the most prominent scholars on dancehall culture, and as a professor at the University of the West Indies at Mona and a personal fan of the music, has first-hand experience. In examining the idea of “slackness” in Jamaican culture, Cooper often focuses on the lyrics of many popular dancehall tracks, which are often superficially seen as severely chauvinistic, especially those of male performers such as Shabba Ranks.⁶ On the contrary, Cooper argues that in actuality, many of these lyrics are indeed egalitarian, pushing for equal opportunity for men and women to experience their sexuality. This is in contrast to many reggae lyrics, such as those of Bob Marley, which she views as more repressive of female sexual freedom, due to their foundation within Rastafarian culture, which typically espouses a restrained and docile female comport.⁷ In my analysis, it seems that typical of traditional values, the more relaxed and traditionally melodic roots or reggae style has been historically overlooked as housing patriarchal undertones, while the brash, sexual and less traditional dancehall style of music, already controversial in traditional mindsets, has become a much easier target for criticism. Following, one of the main problems with superficial analysis of dancehall culture is using it as a scape goat without examining or interpreting lyrics in depth, which is one reason for the controversy surrounding Cooper’s work.

⁶ Carolyn Cooper, “Word, Sound, and Power,” in *Sound Clash: Jamaican Dancehall Culture at Large* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), 1-31. The idea of “slackness” is essential to any discussion of dancehall culture or Jamaican culture in general for that matter. Slackness is essentially the embodiment of contradiction to upper-class societal norms, “an undermining of consensual standards of decency” (4). It is often embodied as overt sexuality and permissiveness, but is also defined by other means, such as a refusal to entertain societal codes of politeness or working outside the prescribed or proper societal method.

⁷ Carolyn Cooper, “Slackness Personified: Representation of Female Sexuality in the Lyrics of Bob Marley and Shabba Ranks,” in *Sound Clash: Jamaican Dancehall Culture at Large*, (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), 73-91.

Cooper also examines female dancehall culture in the context of the African diaspora.⁸ Cooper argues that when female dancehall culture is viewed through the lens of African culture, and thus without the European and Christian influences, it is not an example of “pornography” or even worse as a “mere victim of patriarchy, robbed of all agency” (99). Instead, the sexualized lyrics and dancing are representative of a tribute to female sexuality and fertility, of a liberated sexuality which would not have had to be liberated if it had not been first oppressed by European culture. Sonjah Stanley Niaah, also a professor at the University of the West Indies at Mona, explores similar concepts involving dancehall’s African roots. Niaah argues that the sexual dance moves so prominent in dancehall culture stem from Africa, where female fertility was crucial to survival, and that the trademark “wining” or rotating of the hips and pelvis demonstrated a key inherited survival aspect.⁹ Once again, the criticisms against the sexuality expressed through dancehall music and culture seem to be moot. In reality, however, it seems that almost all dance is somewhat associated with sexuality, and the fact that dancehall participants are just more overt and honest in their display of sexuality, rather than taking pains to hide it, should not posit it as completely against the traditions of dance and musical culture.¹⁰ Overall, these prominent scholars have argued quite sufficiently for the theory that female participation in dancehall cannot be equated to a simple domination and objectification by a patriarchal society. However, while these arguments are accurate, they have not evolved to address modern manifestations of dancehall culture, and there is a room for more argument and debate on the topic.

Methods

⁸ Carolyn Cooper, “Lady Saw Cuts Loose: Female Fertility Rituals in the Dancehall,” in *Sound Clash: Jamaican Dancehall Culture at Large*, (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), 99-123.

⁹ Niaah, Sonjah Stanley. *DanceHall: From Slave Ship to Ghetto* (Ottawa: University of Ottawa Press, 2010).

¹⁰ Judith Lynn Hanna, “Dance and Sexuality: Many Moves,” *Journal of Sex Research* 47:2-3 (March-June 2010): 212-241.

In my analysis, I have focused on reviewing various Jamaican newspaper articles, many from Jamaica's most prominent newspaper, the *Jamaican Gleaner*, in order to ascertain public opinion on dancehall queen competitions as well as actual artists such as Marion Hall, also known as Lady Saw. In addition to the actual content of these articles, I have focused on analyzing the specific wording and vocabulary used to describe such events and persons, in order to pull out the subtleties often subconsciously implied by certain terms, as well as the value placed on certain characteristics. The official Miss Jamaica World and International Dancehall Queen websites have provided me with the requirements for competitors, as well as the actual judging criteria for competitors, which I have analyzed in a similar manner as above.

I have also relied on photos of the competitors, found both posted on these sites as well as in newspaper articles, to analyze how contestants actually fit into the prescribed ideals of beauty in either case. Additionally, the International Dancehall Queen website has provided me with data on the variation of foreign nationalities in the competition, an aspect which is not necessary for the Miss Jamaica World competition, as its competitors are limited to those either born in Jamaica, born to a Jamaican parent, or naturalized as citizens of Jamaica. Finally, travel guides and the official Jamaican tourism site have provided information on the use of dancehall and dancehall queen competitions in recruiting tourism to Jamaica.¹¹ Additionally, my analysis is grounded in the objectification theory espoused by Fredrickson and Roberts¹², as well as Moffitt and Szymanski's expansion on this theory and study involving sexually objectifying environments.¹³ By approaching this argument with a literary analysis of primary texts, visual data, and theory grounded in both psychology, sociology, and feminist studies, I am able to

¹¹ www.visitjamaica.com

¹² Fredrickson, Barbara L. and Tomi-Ann Roberts. "Objectification Theory: Toward Understanding Women's Lived Experiences and Mental Health Risks." *Psychology of Women Quarterly* 21:2 (June 1997), 173-206.

¹³ Moffitt, Lauren B. and Dawn M. Szymanski. "Experiencing Sexually Objectifying Environments: A Qualitative Study," *The Counseling Psychologist* 39:67 (April 2010), 67-108.

present a more comprehensive understanding of the subject matter, and refute counterarguments with greater legitimacy.

Dancehall Queens and Pageant Princesses

Following this scholarship, coupled with general knowledge of the significance and operations of the Miss World Competition, the Miss Jamaica World competition would thus seem to be the antithesis of dancehall culture. Beauty pageants have historically been just that; a contest judging women based solely on their physical appearances and outward displays of appropriate personality traits. On the Miss Jamaica World website, requirements include that contestants must be born in Jamaica, a child of a Jamaican parent or a naturalized citizen of Jamaica. Requirements also include that the contestant must be of “good character and possess charm, poise and personality and have beauty of both face and figure”; quite the opposite of the slackness personified in Jamaican dancehall culture.¹⁴ While the Miss World competition is supposedly intended to showcase each country’s best female representative, most contestants look very similar, albeit with different skin colors and outfit colors. Photos of past contestants and winners typically show women with more Western ideals of beauty: thinner frames, smaller hips, generally more Caucasian features. In fact, the first Jamaican contestant to go on to win Miss World was Carol Joan Crawford in 1963, who beauty epitomized Western ideals, and whose victory led to a very angry Jamaican crowd. Although most Jamaican citizens have at least some, however miniscule, African blood in their heritage, Carol Joan Crawford was by Jamaican standards white, and the idea of a white woman being the best representative of a population that is ninety percent black is rather telling about the power structure and the strength of the dominant society in Jamaica, not to mention the great legacy of colonial influences in Jamaica.

¹⁴ www.missjamaicaworld.com

In contrast, the International Dancehall Queen competition has almost zero requirements, basically solely that the contestant must be at least eighteen years old. While superficial knowledge about the culture would inform one as to other desired characteristics, such as an outgoing personality and dancing ability, it is a generally open competition, and fairly easy to be able to compete in the first round. After this of course, the competition becomes more difficult, but it is relatively easy to enter. Additionally, women from every country are able to participate. Photos of contestants appear less reminiscent of Western ideals of beauty, and more diverse, somewhat owing to the fact that contestants come from around the world. In fact, the 2010 winner, Kristen “Fluffy Girl” Anderson, age twenty-three, weighed two hundred pounds.¹⁵ For someone of this size to compete in the Miss Jamaica World competition is almost unfathomable, and almost completely impossible to imagine a victory. The competition has also seen Japanese and European winners in the past.

Modern Changes: Turning Away From Slackness

In light of this information, it may seem difficult to argue that the sexually empowering elements evident in dancehall culture are not present in this competition. Black women are the stars of the show, whatever size they may be. In this respect, the International Dancehall Queen Competition is a better representative of the most prominent Jamaican nationality than the the Miss Jamaica World Competition. However, there has been a recent trend towards increasing similarity to the Miss Jamaica World competition. This trend is most prominently exhibited in a push against the slackness that has historically epitomized dancehall culture. In an article in the Jamaican Gleaner on February 20, 2011, Krista Henry writes about an interaction with California’s Dancehall Queen, affiliated with the International Dancehall Queen Competition, Miiika Stanley. Henry writes that “Stanley noted the competitive nature of the dancehall

¹⁵ “Fluffy” is used to refer to larger women in Jamaican culture

industry, especially among the queens, as well as the often ‘slack’ image given to them, and decided it was time to put past grudges aside to not just clean up the image of the queens, but to help others.”¹⁶ Slackness however, is the essential quality of dancehall culture which puts it in opposition to dominant society. Stanley’s comments seem to undermine one of the foundations for the argument of female agency and resistance in dancehall culture; by wishing to shed the image of slackness, Stanley is in fact conforming to the Western ideals, colonialism, and societal idea of the proper woman. Additionally, Stanley’s mentioning of “past grudges” is slightly problematic. While there have been controversies among various dancehall queen contestants, this can only be expected in such a highly competitive environment. It is curious as to whom Stanley is actually referring to here; Stanley’s statement could also be seen as an olive branch to the dominant society which historically dancehall participants, especially the women, have been offending and alarming for so long. Stanley seems to be expressing a desire to lay down her guns and become a part of “real” society.

Marion Hall, also known as Lady Saw, arguably the most well known dancehall diva, is also moving away from the ideal of slackness. She has always defended her persona as Lady Saw throughout her career, and with it the ideals and manifestations of dancehall culture. However, in an interview with Howard Campbell of the Daily Gleaner, she expresses an interest in leaving these ideas behind. Campbell reports that Hall “wants to make a turn now that [she’s] all grown up. [She] want[s] to move away from the Lady Saw image.”¹⁷ While it is true that all performers and cultural celebrities must constantly evolve in order to maintain relevancy, it seems possible that financial and celebrity success also engenders a desire to fit into the dominant cultural society in other manners as well. This need for irrational definition goes

¹⁶ Krista Henry, “Dancehall Queens Unite for Charity,” *Jamaica Gleaner*, February 20, 2011.

¹⁷ Howard Campbell, “Mature Lady Saw Moves in Different Direction,” *Jamaica Gleaner*, July 28, 2009.

against the idea of creating separate spaces of self-expression and self-definition espoused previously by Bakare-Yusuf as an essential quality of dancehall culture, and one that validates the high levels of sexuality in dancehall culture as forms of female self-expression and empowerment.¹⁸ The actions and wishes of prominent dancehall women seem to be once again promoting the dominant society's agenda, and this action in itself seems to invalidate a truly authentic desire to continue the promotion and experience of the culture itself.

Modern Changes: Cultural Globalization

In current scholarship, the title of Dancehall Queen has been read as having roots in the African diaspora.¹⁹ In this sense, the new internationality of the International Dancehall Queen competition (the "International" being added in 2003) would presumably be viewed as a continued extension of the African diaspora.²⁰ As the culture continues to evolve and spread along the lines of the African diaspora, it will continue to evolve and manifest itself differently in different areas. In this sense, it could almost be seen as more of an emblem of the culture of the African diaspora and less as one of Jamaican national identity. However, the only elements of dancehall culture which seem to be migrating out of Jamaica are those superficial elements. Rather than a model of diaspora, a model of globalization seems to be the correct format in which to view this internationality. While the global world has become more accepting of diversity, whether exemplified in dancehall culture or less critical and euro-centric ideals of beauty, it too has a dominant culture, and only some of these dimensions will be accepted.²¹

As an international figure, Marion Hall is beginning to separate herself from her identity as Lady Saw. In a 2002 article in the *Jamaica Gleaner*, Tyrone Reid writes that "Lady Saw

¹⁸ Bakare-Yusuf, "Fabricating Identities: Survival and the Imagination in Jamaican Dancehall Culture," 473.

¹⁹ Niaah, *DanceHall: From Slave Ship to Ghetto*, 137-140.

²⁰ Mel Cooke, "'Dancehall Queen' Goes International," *Jamaica Gleaner*, July 25, 2003.

²¹ Richard Wilk, "The Local and the Global in the Political Economy of Beauty: From Miss Belize to Miss World," *Review of the International Political Economy* 2:1 (Winter 1995), 117-134.

makes the money so that Marion can pay the bills”, continuing on to say that “one thing for sure, Lady Saw is either loved or hated to the bone - there is no equilibrium.”²² This article showcases the dichotomy between what could be conceptualized as culture versus reality. As Hall continues to strive for international success, the business woman Hall and the cultural icon Lady Saw are being torn apart. The euro-centric and paternalist dichotomy between the Madonna and the whore is also present here. For Hall to live up to society’s wishes, and for her to be accepted culturally, as well as commercially, it seems imperative that her consumers be well aware of the distinction between her personalities. This need for outside definition goes against the Her music and her culture may be accepted internationally, but for her to be commercially successful it seems the public must view her persona as Lady Saw as just that, an act.

A Sexually Objectifying Environment

Another area in which some of the basic arguments for female agency and empowerment fall short is in the actual setting of the International Dancehall Queen competition. Examining it from Moffitt and Szymanski’s paradigm of sexually objectifying environments, it exemplifies the requirements.²³ Traditional female and male gender rules exist; in fact, even the International Dancehall Queen competition website states that “men have predominantly been the un-official judges of these neighbourhood dancehall decisions,” and they continue to be in control of not only the judgment of the competition, but the advertising and infrastructure as well.²⁴ A setting in which men and women continue to exemplify traditional gender roles does not lend itself easily to promoting equal opportunities for agency. With regards to the second requirement,

²² Tyrone Reid, “Marion Hall and Lady Saw—Two Sides of the Same Coin,” *Jamaica Gleaner*, November 20, 2002.

²³ Moffitt and Szymanski, “Experiencing Sexually Objectifying Environments: A Qualitative Study,” 71. Moffitt and Szymanski identify five characteristics that promote and intensify sexual objectification in order to define a Sexually Objectifying Environment or SOE: the existence of traditional female and male gender roles, a high degree of attention being paid to physical or sexual attributes of women’s bodies, the existence of a high probability of male contact, women having little power in the environment, the existence of approval and encouragement of male gaze

²⁴ www.internationaldancehallqueen.com

there is obviously a high degree of attention being paid to both the physical and sexual attributes of the women's bodies; regardless of arguing whether or not it may be empowering, this essentially makes up the bulk of the judging criteria, as well as being a key draw for the audiences. Thirdly, even though female contestants are distanced from the crowd, there is still a high probability that male contact exists, or at least the desire for it. Furthermore, once again, women have little power in the competition; they are judged by men and while having freedom during their time on stage, they have no agency in selecting the schedule of events and are confined to the areas designated for them to perform in. Moreover, upon registering for the competition, contestants are required to sign away any possible rights for use of their images, as well as signing a contract with the International Dancehall Queen Competition's promotion company, Big Head Promotions, which would require them to remain with the company for at least one year if they succeeded in winning. Finally, there is an approval and encouragement of male gaze; the women are on display, and the more they incite the crowd the better.

On the other hand, dancehall culture exhibits all of these same characteristics as well. However, the culture has its protections: those arguments described early. The African influences in dancing, promiscuous dress, and overall slackness were combating the dominant, oppressive society. However, with the competition, these protections are lost; now that the culture has become commercialized, only parts of it made it through. The essential point to understand here is that while some elements of the authentic culture are indeed present, the cultural performers, the dancehall queen competitors, are no longer in control of their chosen methods of resistance. A desire to gain commercially from one's own cultural experiences and creations is not what is on trial here. Rather, the problem occurs with the fact that the cultural creators are no longer in control, but are being used for the commercial gains of those who are

really in charge—the male promoters of the competition. Dancehall culture is turned into a commodity in the form of the International Dancehall Queen Competition.

Women as Commodity

While the above arguments show the desire of dancehall culture participants for commodification and cultural editing, we still need to examine the opinions and intentions those outside of authentic dancehall culture in order to show that the female contestants are being used for their financial gain. In almost all news stories about the International Dancehall Queen Competition, a similar theme could be found: a focus on profits and the promotion of tourism. In 2003, following the addition of “International” to the competition, Mel Cooke wrote an article for the *Jamaica Gleaner* about this new change and its implication.²⁵ Jomo Cato, the brand manager for Red Label Wine, the main sponsor and promoter of the International Dancehall Queen Competition, expressed the company’s sponsorship commitment to the competition by stating that “Red Label has used its association with dancehall to build the brand.” It would be difficult to state Cato and his company’s intentions any clearer; they intend to use the competition, which is at its heart built on the cultural creations of dancehall women, to build their company profits. Cato continues on to say that “if Jamaica is serious about getting rich, Jamaica needs to get serious about its culture [...] Dancehall Queen, if properly packaged, can be one of the biggest exports out of Montego Bay and Jamaica.” Cooke also indicated that Cato continued to receive strong applause and support throughout the duration of his speech. Thus, the goal of those in control of the competition, who are notably all male, seems to be able to profit as much as possible, not only in Jamaica, but internationally, which is really where the most money can be made, as well as where Jamaica has historically relied on profits from a heavily export dependent economy. The promoters of the competition are effectively turning

²⁵ Mel Cook, “Dancehall Queen goes international,” *Jamaica Gleaner*, July 25, 2003.

female participation in as well as female contributions to dancehall culture, which were originally recognized as forms of resistance, self-expression, and empowerment, into a commodity, used to sell Jamaica and attract tourism.

One might cite the fact that the first and second place winners of the International Dancehall Queen Competition are in fact awarded cash prizes: one hundred thousand Jamaican dollars to the first place winner, and forty thousand Jamaican dollars to the second place article. At the time of this article, however, this was only the equivalent to approximately sixty thousand US dollars for first place. Considering that the per capita income in Jamaica is less than five thousand dollars, this is still a lot of money. However, the amount of money that Red Label Wine and other sponsors are making off of the competition is certainly greater, and more dancehall women than just the top two winners could benefit greatly if they had control over the competition. A few women may be gaining resources, but in doing so, they are losing power overall.

In his studies on pageants in Belize, also looking at the Miss Belize World Pageant Richard Wilk has demonstrated a similar commercialization of Belizean culture. His discussion on the acceptance of difference in pageant culture is rather compelling. He argues that by allowing the expression of difference in beauty pageants such as the Miss World Competition, the dominant societal culture is able to express an acceptance of diversity without actually dealing with real differences. For example, in the Miss World Competition, although contestants come from countries and continents across the world, and very diverse ethnic identities, from the Mestizo heritage of Central America to the African heritage in the Caribbean for example, they all still somehow look the same. Because the competition accepts such diverse competitors, there is no need to address any questions of bias or diversity beyond that. There is still a similar

weight range among competitors, and most exhibit other characteristics stemming from the euro-centric Caucasian idea of beauty. The focus on physical attributes also pulls away from a discussion of race or culture. Wilks writes that “pageants also make ethnicity safe by subordinating cultural identity to gender and sexuality.”²⁶ Packaging women into identities based solely on their female sexuality strips them of their own agency or possibility of resistance by stripping away their personality and intelligence. Applied to the International Dancehall Queen Competition, the question behind female empowerment is being stripped away: women see participation in the competition as a means to an end, and the promoters in charge of the competition see the women as products to sell, once again demonstrating the increasing similarity between the International Dancehall Competition and the Miss Jamaica World Competition.

Another facet of Wilk’s study that is manifesting itself here is the editing of cultures in order to make them appear more attractive to dominant society. In this case, I was able to find evidence of this on the official Jamaican tourism website.²⁷ Mention of the International Dancehall Queen was initially difficult to find; searching the word “dancehall” on the website yielded few results. However, I eventually had a considerably larger amount of luck when I search for terms like “reggae,” “rasta,” or “roots music.” While these keywords still directed me to information concerning the International Dancehall Queen Competition, the absence of the word “dancehall” is rather revealing. First, it shows the uncertainty the Jamaican tourism board has with foreign knowledge about dancehall culture. They certainly do not want to confuse people, or at the worst scare them away. Secondly, the use of replacement words such as “reggae” demonstrate a knowledge of the high profitability Jamaica has experienced through the

²⁶ Wilk, “The Local and the Global in the Political Economy of Beauty: From Miss Belize to Miss World,” 128.

²⁷ www.visitjamaica.com

export of their music historically, as well as its continued popularity outside of Jamaica. Finally, it demonstrates the high importance of tourism in Jamaica's economy, to the point that they would even edit the name of a cultural element to ensure a continued interest in Jamaican music.

Further Research

There are many other areas to look for supporting evidence for this claim, which would be constitute intriguing areas to explore in the future. One area which could certainly use more observation would be a comparison between the International Dancehall Queen Competition, and indeed beauty pageants in general to prostitution. Although almost always a comparison drawing strong emotions and opinions, the comparison between the functions of the International Dancehall Queen Competition and the oldest profession is something to discuss. In doing so, a good place to start is looking at the 1997 movie *Dancehall Queen*, directed by Letts and Elgood. It involves a rags to riches type story of a single mother, Marcia, forced to allow the sexual exploitation of herself and her mother, until she is able to reinvent herself as a Dancehall Queen, winning a competition and gaining financial independence. Sandra C. Duvivier writes that “while appearing to conform to the patriarchal script, Marcia’s immersion in Dancehall, like Dancehall itself, is an act of resistance and transcendence from patriarchy, poverty, and the exploitation of the female body that normally follows.”²⁸ While I do agree with Duvivier’s analysis, I think that once again, the modern manifestations of the original dancehall queen competitions, such as the one pictured in Marcia’s small town, have mutated from their humble beginnings. Rather, modern competitions seem to be enlisting and recruiting women into a sort of sexualized slavery reminiscent from prostitution. Rather than overcoming the exploitation of

²⁸ Sandra C. Duvivier, “‘My Body is My Piece of Land’: Female Sexuality, Family, and Capital in Caribbean Texts,” *Callaloo* 31:4 (Fall 2008):117.

the female body through the dancehall queen competition, modern competitors are submitting to it.

Conclusions

The International Dancehall Queen Competition is becoming increasingly similar to the Miss Jamaica World Competition, and this sense, to beauty pageants and competitions in general. The changes exhibited in contestants, from their increasingly strong interest in gaining respect from dominant Jamaican as well as global society, to their increasingly physical similarity to the euro-centric ideals of beauty found among the contestants of the Miss Jamaica World Competition, show a desire to edit down dancehall culture to a few superficial elements desired by outside populations.

In contrast to the authentic culture from which it came out of, modern manifestations of Dancehall culture, epitomized by the International Dancehall Queen Competition, are being packaged as a commodity to be used to attract tourism to Jamaica and to increase profits for those in control. The high level of control of the competition from persons outside of the culture, specifically the male promoters and judges of the competition, make it increasingly difficult for women competitors to gain empowerment through self expression, as instead they are forced to express themselves solely for the approval of the male judges, who in turn are most interested in using their contributions for their own profits.

First, this is demonstrated by the competition's and participants' turn against slackness, an essential quality of dancehall culture, representing a turn against the need for a realm of independent expression free from restrictions by the dominant society. Second, the internationality of the competition is does not express either a true Jamaican identity or an identity centered in the African Diaspora, but rather the effects of globalization and cultural

editing with the intention to export dancehall as a product to be consumed by foreigners. Finally, the intense context of a sexually objectifying environment in which this competition occurs makes the idea and possibility female self expression and empowerment feasibly unattainable.

Specifically, this is negatively affecting its female participants, as what was originally a site for self expression and female empowerment is now turning into an area with high levels of sexual objectification and gender equality. In accordance with Fredrickson and Robert's studies on Objectification Theory, as well as Moffitt and Szymanski's study on the effects of sexually objectifying environments, adverse psychological effects can be expected for women involved in institutions such as the International Dancehall Queen Competition and the Miss Jamaica World Competition. Additionally, these modern mutations of dancehall culture are subverting their authentic cultural roots by effectively supporting the dominant societal populations, cultures, and practice of subjugation left as residual consequences of colonization as well as the heavy influence of Rastafarian religion and culture.

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