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ARTICLE



Jamaican Dancehall: Demasking the grotesque realism of race and class in ghetto 'gangsta' performance

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ABSTRACT

This article considers the self-conscious, exaggerated performance of gangster ghetto subjectivities by the younger and more media savvy generation of Jamaican 'gangster dancehall' artists as an example of resistant subjectivization. Through masquerade and hyperbolic visual representations of the 'grotesque' black body, resistant subjectivization facilitates the questioning and transgression of dominant narratives which negatively cast the black body as 'monstrous.' At the same time, the commercialization of gangster dancehall and the grotesque dancehall subject is seen as contributing to the reinforcement of unfavorable stereotypes of the black subject. This potentially undermines the element of resistance in the counterhegemonic discourse of gangster dancehall and leads to tension, not only between hegemonic and counter-hegemonic narratives on black subjectivities, but also between the counterhegemonic discourses within gangster dancehall itself. Through the critical explorations of writings by Jacques Lacan, Stuart Hall, Judith Butler, Julia Kristeva, Franz Fanon and Homi Bhabha, this paper tries to establish whether or not this performance of the monstrous black self indeed represents a form of empowerment for the black ghetto subject in post-colonial Jamaica.

KEYWORDS

Identity; counter-hegemony; postcolonial; blackness; urban; dancehall

The empowerment of the ghetto subject in Jamaican dancehall in part resides in the fact that this urban musical genre openly acknowledges the element of 'mimicry and doubling' in the constitution of the subject of color. As Bhabha professes, the subject of color uniquely experiences the 'dissembling image of being in at least two places at once' (1994, 44).

Dancehall and more specifically gangster dancehall exaggerate this condition of seeing and experiencing oneself as Other (Hall 2000, 706), a condition particularly exacerbated in the disfavored black subject of the lower class. It provides an outlet for the poor black subject to own and consequently gain control over this oppressive otherness, formulated in the spectral gaze of the European subject/Other and represented in the canons of respectability upheld by the brown upper and middle classes in contemporary Jamaican society. By making the poor urban black subject aware of the fact that he or she *is* what he or she has to reject in order to *be*, this doubling or ambivalent subject/object position becomes potentially advantageous, as the

masquerading of this abject Otherness serves to question the absolute truths upon which dominant subjectivities are based. Nevertheless, the contradiction inherent in being at once an object of discrimination and an empowered subject of that discrimination makes any discussion of hegemonic and counter-hegemonic narratives of race and cultural expressions of the subjugated classes particularly complicated.

This paper departs from the premise that the 'post-colonized' subject of color deals with the agony of choosing between being invisible or being visible through the representation of the reprehensible black self, by either imitating the alienating gaze of the white subject/Other (Fanon 2008), as in the case of the brown upper middle class of Jamaica, or through masquerade and mockery of the very mechanisms of his marginalization, a role more likely to be adopted by the darker-skinned lower classes (Aching 2002). The latter suggests a carnivalesque form of transgression or resistance to hegemonic discourses on race and class, but it is not without its shortcomings. As Foust points out, there is speculation on whether carnival can be considered true 'resistance, or a cathartic and sanctioned identity play' when there is a suspected 'ability of dominant institutions to co-opt the identity play of carnival' (2010, 9). Yet, if only in its inversion of the intellect's superior position to the body in dominant discourse, an inversion which permits the socially and economically marginalized to become agents, albeit temporarily, of their identity, then it may be possible to consider the carnivalesque, and consequently dancehall narratives, that employ such strategies of resistance as an effective counter-hegemonic narrative of the black oppressed.

Hence, masquerading or the camping of the 'monstrosity' of the ghetto body may be viewed as an effective means of resisting the 'natural' truths regarding race, sexuality, and respectability sustained by dominant ideology, as the black subject of the masquerade not only exaggerates the hegemonic (persistently white) gaze, but also self-consciously performs his own abjection under this gaze. This, in turn, is potentially empowering, as it is in this uncanny glancing back at the gazing European subject that the gazed upon, negated object is able to make his presence known. Michelle Ann Stephens refers to this returned gaze of the oppressed Other as a disruptive force which reminds the white subject of the 'terrifying gap between the white subject's own felt body and his body-image' (2014, 26). Consequently, this agential recourse of the black subject reflects the lack of wholeness of the gazing white subject (represented in the brown middle and upper classes) whose plenitude and hence subjectivity is based on the invisibility or the negation of the native body (Bhabha 1994). In so doing, it allows for the subjectivization of the no longer 'invisible' object.

The multicultural myth of 'out of many, one people'

Jamaica's national motto of 'out of many one people' represents the hegemonic discourse on race in Jamaica, which obviates the social reality of the majority of the population. Scholars such as Carolyn Cooper (2012) and Deborah Thomas (2004) believe that this motto is a multicultural myth which promotes the ideal of a mixed population while marginalizing the nation's 'black majority by asserting that the idealized face of the Jamaican nation is multiracial' (Cooper 2012). The motto, which Thomas considers to be an example of brown or creole nationalism (2004, 13), is not unlike the national projections of identity in Latin American countries such as Mexico or Ecuador, in which

racial mixing (*mestizaje*) with the colonial subject is posited as the standard of national identity (García and Telles 2013). Such projections ‘whitewash’ or render invisible subjects of African descent who do not identify with or are not identifiable within these parameters of mixed race. Additionally, the motto accords equal status to racial categories in Jamaica and subscribes to a color-blindness in which brown middle and upper-class subjects who are seemingly reluctant to question their privileged somatic position carry on the legacy of their colonizer forefathers under the guise of ‘respectability’ (Powrie 1956). Yet, precisely because of this apparent refusal to confront this idealization of Jamaican identity which posits the European Other as superior, the racial divide persists (Hope 2009) in dichotomies between uptown/downtown or (upper) middle/lower classes (Brown-Glaude 2011) referenced in dancehall lyrics.

This is why dancehall music, a musical genre which literally emerged from the performed dance spaces of the ghettos of Kingston (Stanley-Niaah 2010), provides fertile ground for the exploration of not just the element of performativity in identity but also the performance of this doubling of identity of the marginalized colonized Other. In fact, not only does dancehall represent the position of the invisible (post)colonized Black Other but it is also a performance of this Otherness. Its ability to imitate, exaggerate, and deconstruct social signifiers of race, class, and sexuality in its performance of subjectivity leads to a certain reflexivity which encourages the ‘double consciousness’ which Thomas thinks is necessary in order to challenge the European colonial Other idealized in creole multiracialism (2004, 13).

That said, one could conclude that it is primarily blackness (social and racial), the signifier of the silenced ‘presence Africaine’ (Hall 2000) and consequently the abject of a colonial past and postcolonial present, which becomes an authenticating signifier in ghetto subjectivities and, consequently, dancehall. Therefore, although blackness is not explicitly asserted in dancehall lyrics, and there may be no actual reference to African culture, it becomes visible in the absence of what whiteness represents. As a consequence, the black dancehall subject could be thought of as what Bhabha terms the “‘missing person” that haunts the identity of the postcolonial bourgeoisie’ (1994, 45). He represents an ‘untamed’ blackness representative of the globalized society we live in, and which is ‘unapologetically presentist’ (Thomas 2004, 13) and open to transcultural influences.

For this reason, to speak of a disruptive blackness is not so much to speak of a conscious decision on the part of the dancehall performer to act out a kind of prefixated abject blackness, as it is about actively refusing to live up to a social ‘whiteness.’ Consequently, to comprehend the potential subversiveness of dancehall music culture it is not as necessary to define the significance of the term ‘blackness’ as it is to understand how blackness is constructed in relation to race, class, and sexuality in a postcolonial Jamaica where, despite the fact that 97% of its population is black (Hope 2009), the black body is still kept in check by colonial, white values disguised as respectability (Cooper 2004; Gray 2004).

Gangster identities as ‘drag’

The newer, gorier visual narrative of gangster dancehall promoted by Tommy Lee Sparta has more potential to shake traditional discourse on race and the body to the core. In this genre of dancehall, violence, guns, death, and Hollywood visual codes are hyperbolized and recycled to construct audio-visual representations of the ultra-masculinized

notorious ghetto subject, making it the perfect medium through which to examine the contradictions and complexities of post subjectivities that result from this schizophrenic splitting of the postcolonial subject of color. That is, it is the *put-on-ness* or exaggerated depiction of the postcolonial ghetto gangster subject and its glorification of non-desirable subjectivities that create positions of transgression and subversion from which to contest dominant discourses of identity.

As a result, through their excessively theatrical performances of gangster subjectivities, dancehall artists Tommy Lee Sparta and Vybz Kartel can be seen to fulfil such a function. The rotting body of Sparta's 'Uncle Demon' would be what Bakhtin, who defines the grotesque as the site of 'exaggeration, hyperbolism, excessiveness', would refer to as the 'grotesque body'(1984, 303). Consequently, if the black body as a 'symbol of evil and ugliness' (Fanon 2008, 157) is the grotesque body in dominant discourse, then Sparta's corporeal assumption of this abjection may be an intentional unsettling of the dominant position of the white gaze. In this sense, by owning stereotypical notions of blackness and making it highly visible through the exaggerated representation of the grotesque body, these gangster dancehall performers expose the lack in the construction of white identity, represented by norms of respectable behavior of the bourgeoisie.

Both Sparta and Kartel build on this uncanny black presence by describing the body as putrid in the performance of gangster violence, or what Cooper (2004) and Gray (2004) refer to as '*badmanism*' or 'badness-honour,' respectively. Both performers systematically ascribe a certain monstrosity to the black body through descriptions of the destruction of the bodies. Whether it be 'bus' (burst) heads in My Scheme (Kartel), 'heads open like chopped belly mek dem find boy body smelly,' or 'head split inna half, we kill them and laugh' in 'Warn Dem' (Sparta), the ghetto performer/executioner proudly projects back onto the European Other a monstrosity embodied in the brown bourgeoisie subject. Sparta, in particular, does not limit himself to a verbal description but rather takes to dramatizing this excessive violence on the body of the black subject. Flesh rots off faces in 'Shook' and eyes roll back into their sockets in the dramatization of the putrid corpse. In this sense, Sparta sets out to be a true dramaturge of badness, whether it is by means of painting a skull on his face, wearing a *Scream* mask or a Hannibal Lechter-like muzzle, or refashioning his voice into a hoarse falsetto to imitate Hollywood representations of speaking demonic spirits.

Yet the use of role-play is not new to dancehall. Cooper describes *badmanism* itself as a theatrical pose constructed from a potpourri of Hollywood villains, a cathartic ritual not unlike the brown middle class's adoption of carnival, to release the anxieties of 'the body that has been incised with the scarifications of history' (2004, 138). Tommy Lee Sparta's representation of extreme 'badness' involving decomposing corpses, skeletal costumes, skull masks, whitened black faces, and scoffing white eyed subjects, in addition to his graphic lyrics that conjure up images of maimed bodies of heads blown open or chopped limbs, places the grotesque black body center stage. This glorification of lawless behavior depicted visually and described in ghetto gangster dancehall lyrics thumbs its nose at middle-class respect for laws and decency in the treatment of the body.

Nonetheless, it may be argued that the grotesque black body in gangster dancehall is nothing but a marketing strategy to attract media attention and consequently secure more record sales. In other words, it is just another version of the system it

purports to vitiate. This possible commercial exploitation of the grotesque black body may be due to the high competitiveness in the dancehall arena, which encourages new gangster dancehall artists to constantly look for innovative ways to distinguish themselves from the rest of their peers. However, despite the commercial benefits of using these exaggerated visual signifiers and global references of 'evil' in his music videos, Sparta's visual narrative also borrows substantially from African culture, through his references to rituals popularly (though not always correctly) associated with Obeah, such as the conjuring up of the dead to exact vengeance on one's enemies. The séance like rituals and sacrificial ceremonies in 'Maniac' and the white painted faces of dancers in 'Lucifer,' which recall the South African group Die Antwoord's video of the cover of the Jamaican song 'Fatty Boom Boom,' are part of a global aesthetics of African pagan culture.

However, Sparta does not seem to be as interested in the authentic representation of African-derived practices as he is in using the white gaze represented in the mixing of common exaggerated notions of African rituals with stereotypical, Hollywood-informed visual imagery of 'black magic' to lend his character an evilness that is supposedly so potent that even Satan avoids his company ('evil til Satan no wah si mi ... well dark') and consequently, consolidate his *badman* status in yet another version of outlawry (Yancy 2008). Therefore, this devil discourse which forms a part of Sparta's performance should not be taken simply as an attack on Christian values, but as a mockery of authority in general. Through the persona of 'Uncle Demon,' for example, Sparta is able to enact his *donmanship* in a highly theatrical way, certifying himself as the ultimate *badman*.

Nonetheless, it is Sparta's particular adoption of the persona of Uncle Demon which has created conflict with other dancehall veterans such as Bounty Killer, who does not view Sparta's use of devil iconography in his peculiar version of gangster dancehall as having a similar subversive purpose as his own violent discourse of ghetto life. For that reason, Bounty Killer does not see a contradiction in choosing only to be offended by Sparta's glorification of the devil figure in Christian discourse and not Sparta's use of graphic images of the maimed and degraded black body. Killer, who refers to himself as a 'devil conqueror,' sees himself as the absolute defender of Christian values in the dancehall arena. By doing so, Killer is not only defending the dominant narrative of Christianity and therefore values associated with the brown middle class, but is also positioning himself as the only authentic counter hegemonic representation of the ghetto subject. He admonishes Sparta to 'leave the demon thing and do the right thing' (KsleezyMusic Dancehall Promo 2012) which renders Sparta's discourse as unworthy in its attack against the establishment, as only a stance supported by established values of decency is worthy of going up against the establishment. In other words, the hegemonic discourse of Christianity is used by Killer to defend and authenticate the counter-hegemonic discourse of ghetto identity: 'All him fi do is leggo the demon and devil thing and make food and bread for your family' (KsleezyMusic Dancehall Promo 2012).

Slackness

Although class and race are necessary components of ghetto identity, sexuality, as Gray (2004) mentions, is just as constitutive of ghetto subjectivities in that it conditions what is considered to be socially acceptable or respectable behavior of the black body, which

still represents the undesirable (Fanon 2008), loud, and unruly grotesque body in a highly racially and economically divided country such as Jamaica (Gray 2004). Apparently then, it is only the black underclass that is prone to errant sexual behavior (Gray 2004, 310) that violate the accepted norms of the proper display or non-display of the body, the norms which are themselves determined by race and class.

In Bakhtin's grotesque realism, the body is degraded to the orifices of its lower stratum from which uncontained substances flow as the inner meets the outer in 'defecation and copulation, conception, pregnancy and birth' (1984, 21). Hence, one could say that the grotesque Bakhtinian body, which places emphasis on the genital organs, is ultimately a sexualized one. Gangster dancehall, in its elevation of 'slackness,' or explicit sexual behavior, celebrates the grotesqueness of this sexed body. According to Gray, this also contributes to the subversive element in dancehall in a society that endeavors to keep the 'extreme sexuality' of the urban poor in check, as it is apparently the job of the middle classes to rescue ghetto people from their 'debased moral status' (2004, 311). In this sense, Cooper (2004) believes that this slackness attributed to the black lower class can become another avenue through which the oppressed black subject is able to subvert the sanctimonious standards of decent behavior upheld by the middle class. Additionally, by owning the slackness in which the middle-class contradictorily partake during carnival, dancehall not only makes the uncomfortable presence of the grotesque black body felt but it also exposes the duplicitousness of the so-called respectability of the dominant Other (Cooper 2004, 138).

Nevertheless, there are constructions of abjectness within the gangster dancehall discourse which, rather than empower the grotesque black subject, insist on its negation. This is the case with the female black subject, who like her male counterpart is linked to the abject through the grotesque black body. Nevertheless, unlike him, she is not in the position of owning her abjectness and therefore is not able to mimic it and reflect it back onto the oppressive gaze. The gangster dancehall discourse is primarily a masculine one, in which female subjects act as mere props in the construction of hyper masculine subjectivities (Hope 2010). As a consequence, the grotesque sexualized female body, which, as an Other denied access to the gaze in this already process of Othering the black ghetto gangster subjectivization, is doubly alienated. Extreme *badmanism* represented in these hyper masculine identities is dependent on the silenced black female Other in much the same way the European subject is on the silenced black subject/object. She helps to define the black male subject by standing for what he is not. She is what the *badman* black subject measures himself up against to reaffirm and give stability to his ultra *badman* masculine identity. She becomes the abject of his abject self, which would explain why the expressions Sparta uses to insult his enemies and question their badness quotient are linked to the female body.

Such phrases as 'suck pussy face' or 'go suck your mother' not only reveal the dichotomy of mother and whore on which feminine sexuality is based in dominant discourse, but also suggests that a man who would pleasure a woman by mixing the orifice of the upper body with that of the lower female body can only be the most abject Other of the *badman*. It is hence, not difficult to conclude, as Gray does, that slackness or 'sexual extremism' is an integral part of the *badman* discourse (2004, 313). As abject feminine sexuality, it not only bolsters the ghetto masculine identity by allowing him to project his ego ideal unto this negatively defined feminine space, but also, as a subject

denied the gaze, is able to be brought under his control in literal service of his badness. It is really control over this slackness associated with the black lower class female body that is the true sign of 'badness honor.' Tommy Lee Sparta's female subjects silently gyrate their half-naked bodies beside him as he tells his enemies to beware of him sending over one of his 'demon' girls to 'go suck off you cock and murder you' or 'come inna you mouth and shot off you suck pussy face.' Thus, it is not just the open confrontation with middle class values involved in celebrating slackness, embodied in the sexualized female black Other that is the true sign of 'badness honor.' Rather, it is also the celebration of the black male subject's dominion over this slackness to further his process of identity through his ability to tame this unspeakable fundamentally demonic Thing that exemplifies black female sexuality .

For this reason, on the one hand, 'sexual extremism' (Gray 2004) as a signifier of loose moral standards may be considered transgressive in the broad sense of ghetto identities threatening established values which marginalize them. However, on the other hand, the treatment of black female sexuality itself is in keeping with dominant discourse of female sexuality in general. The black female subject is anchored in the abject, given that in these videos she is built around the construction of hyper masculine identities and thus does not own her abjection. Her monstrosity serves no other purpose than to confirm masculine myths of the inherently evil nature of the feminine subject, which in turn not only maintains the illusion of plenitude of both the white and black male subjects, but also strengthens the very abject identity which anchors her in her own disempowerment.

Black skin, black mask

In addition to a discussion of the utilization of objectified female bodies and graphically violent lyrics to potentiate the *badman* persona, Tommy Lee Sparta's use of masks in his masquerade of the abject is also worthy of comment.

Sparta's usage of masquerade to create and enact mythical characters in his dancehall music videos speaks to both the abstract and literal performance of the masquerade, which respectively involves the fronting of identity (Riviere [1929] 1991), as in the case of *badmanism*, and masking, the literal use of masks or makeup typical in folk rituals in the Caribbean. In particular, Sparta's masquerade of Lucifer reflects a common tradition in the Caribbean, where folkloric renditions of the devil by the urban black poor formed a part of popular festivities. In fact, Sparta's devil mask is reminiscent of the masked devils armed with pitch forks in the Jonkonnu (John Canoe) street parade at Christmas in Jamaica (The Gleaner 2014), a tradition which serves as an example of the contradictory syncretism of European and African cultures. Jonkonnu illustrates how the black underclass (slaves) appropriate the negative aspects attributed them in popular performances to create an iconoclastic discourse of their empowerment.

Concurrently, Aching's (2002) study shows that it is not uncommon for the Afro-Caribbean subject to artificially blacken his skin in order to engage in the embodiment of the devil figure. Both the devil in the Jonkonnu street parades of Jamaica and the *jab-molassi* (devil character covered in molasses) in Trinidad carnival are characters popularized by slaves in representation of the grotesque black body, which have infiltrated

Caribbean folk culture. For example, the *jab molassi* 'mimics members of the white French Creole elite who masqueraded as their black gardeners and servants' (Aching 2002, 17). This consisted of slaves blackening their already black skin to perform the negative qualities attributed to the black subject, something Bert Williams was to repeat later in his black minstrel performances (Chude-Sokei 2006).

Aching writes that blackening black skin facilitates a strategic 're-appropriation of blackness beyond which no further mimicry is feasible' (2002, 17). In other words, the *jab-molassi* was originally a character fashioned by the white plantocracy to project onto the African subject/object their most basic instincts and fears, demonizing an already demonized and dehumanized subject. Yet the unspeakable, unspoken Thing (Kristeva 1982) from the 'disturbing distance in-between' (Bhabha 1994, 47) of the colonial Self and colonized Other speaks back from behind these devil masks. This masquerade, consequently, turns the representation back on itself as it proudly acknowledges its abjectness, destabilizing in the process, 'a tradition of representation that conceives of identity as the satisfaction of a totalizing, plenitudinous object of vision' (Bhabha 1994, 47).

The mask is the theatrical accessory in the performance through which the abstract concept of the abject is actively constructed. In the case of the white subject in black (mask) face, the mask does more than hide the identity of the subject beneath, it allows him to assume the identity of the feared Other in a clear performance of mask wearing, which leaves no doubt as to the actual race of the masquerader, being the very mask the tell-tale sign of this construction of fantasy. Masquerading here is the covering over of lack as it erodes the distinction between self and Other, contributing to the mythic plenitude the subject seeks. He partakes in a harmless performance in which the Other, a silent projection of his fear and loathing, is limited in this controlled spectacle of whiteness as blackness. Interestingly, according to Chude-Sokei (2006), Bert Williams' performing partner Claude Walker considered black face on a white performer to be more of an 'exaggeration of whiteness' than of blackness and hence the ridiculing of the white performer. The black performer in black face, on the other hand, gets a chance to ridicule whiteness: by willingly performing what is meant to ridicule him, he not only turns the joke on the would be offender but also shows himself to be better than his white counterpart at performing the very offensive act that is supposed to ridicule him, the result of which is double ridicule for the white subject.

In the carnivalization of blackness, the black subject is, in theory, taking control of his dehumanization and converting it into a powerful weapon which he unleashes against the dehumanizing subject. Aching (2002) sees the act of masking as an affirmation of presence. That is, the black subject, upon converting his invisibility into a performance, one made more powerful by the skin color of the real subject occupying the mask, is owning his Otherness and representing it as his own. He owns the Thing that alienates him and reflects it back unto itself revealing the mythic element in its construction. Aching writes that to wear the abject body, be it in the form of masquerading as a dragon or wearing a devil mask in carnival is a transgressive act which crosses the limits of 'sanctioned public behaviour' (2002, 58).

Nevertheless, as in the case of Riviere's (Hughes, [1929] 1991) masquerade of feminism, the masquerading of criminality and violence (Gray 2003) in the hyperbolized representation of ghetto identities (the grotesque black body of the underclass) runs the danger of reaffirming dominant and subjugating perceptions of ghetto identity,

even as it attempts to represent the gaze of the invisible other. In other words, although the representation of the grotesque black body could be considered to be what Grosz (1991) would term the unveiling of the phallus, referring to the revelation of the mythic component in dominant discourse, there is no guarantee that the object of the gaze will transcend its objectification to challenge its pre-dictated identity.

As a result, the use of the grotesque black body comes dangerously close to stereotyping (Bhabha 1994), which bears similarities to the act of 'returning' the black body to itself under the white gaze (Yancy 2008). Or perhaps even worse, it resembles the 'doubled' black subject returning the gaze not from his subjugated and therefore uncanny position, but from the imagined position of the white subject. Yet, Kristeva (1982) would hold that there is still an element of transgression in the representation of the abject to the dominant gaze, which, in this case, is the grotesque body mirroring the white gaze back onto the dominant white subject position, consequently exposing his or her lack. Thus, by forcing the subject to face what they reject, the abject grotesque black body could be a disruptive force in dominant subjectivities (Stephens 2014, 26). In this way, the masquerading of the grotesque black body speaks back from its negated space of its constituted invisibility, subverting what Bhabha refers to as the *masculinist*, racist gaze by presenting it with a counter gaze of that absence (1994, 47).

Skin bleaching in dancehall. Whiteness as performance

The skin as canvass also enters the arena of corporeal subjectivization in dancehall culture. The whitened tattooed black skin, enhanced by skin-bleaching products, opens up the debate on the epidermalization of racial identity,

There are those who may argue that since dancehall originated with the black urban lower class it has a tacit debt to this racial group to not further contribute to the racial hierarchy or colorism (Hunter 2007) of the wider society through the practice of chemically whitening (bleaching) one's skin. Nevertheless, at least for Vybz Kartel, (GazaEmpire 2011) skin bleaching has nothing to do with racial identity, as skin color is (or at least it should be) inconsequential to the definition of one's identity. It would appear that for Kartel, the color of one's skin is only as important as its ability to blend well with the other colors on the color chart of a particular tattoo. That is, skin color has the same functionality as the blank pages of a 'coloring book' and thus the same superficiality as the color selected at any given time to emphasize a particular message written on the body. To this effect, Kartel, in an 'On Stage' interview with Winford Williams on his justification for bleaching his skin, sidesteps the whole issue of race and likens this practice to just another of the many fads to be found in dancehall. He thus empties the act of bleaching of its potential political significance in dancehall culture, which is representative of the black majority. Vybz Kartel asserts,

A lot of appearance altering practices that were once deemed controversial or even taboo during a certain period, now it's just style. A perfect example would be males wearing earrings.

Bleaching 25 years ago meant something different than bleaching now. Vybz Kartel is just a person that feel like fi get mi tattoo brilliant and more showing and just feel like fi just rub on something. It has nothing to do with anything about self-hate or a denial of the Garveyite message of blackness. It has nothing to do with that. It is all about style and we as black people can dictate whatever style we want. (GazaEmpire 2011)

Kartel here makes it clear that 'blackness' for him runs deeper than skin color. His donning of (epidermal) whiteness through bleaching to make his tattoos more patent is one way of showing that ethnicity surpasses the actual color of the skin; that black identity cannot be wrapped up and contained in skin color but rather is constructed by other factors. In other words, there are no rigid physical limits to black identity, the fluidity of borders of the grotesque body places the definition of blackness in the hands of the subject. This concept of black identity as flexible is also reflected in Thomas' (2004) 'modern' or 'bracketed' blackness, which situates blackness in a more transnational arena, subject, as Hope (2009) comments, to changing trends of style and fashion. So, gangster ghetto dancehall's ever evolving ways of performing blackness cannot be expected to subvert only hegemonic discourses of blackness, but also older counter hegemonic notions of this blackness represented by hardcore dancehall gangster veterans such as Bounty Killer, who decries bleaching as an affront to authentic gangster (read masculine) identities (Hope 2009).

What Butler (2007) would refer to as a process of identity, is for Kartel a continuum of 'styling.' Kartel's philosophy on bleaching attempts to demonstrate that racial identity, in this case, blackness, is not only a mythic construction but can be just as socially constructed as whiteness. That is, just as whiteness, signifier of oppressive colonial values in postcolonial Jamaica, can be embodied in the non-white (brown) middle class subject, blackness does not have to be limited to an epidermal representation. Kartel's argument is that in the same way that black people can straighten their hair (for manageability) and not lose their blackness, so should he be able to lighten his skin to enhance his tattoos ('she say mi skin pretty like a coloring book') without being accused of abandoning his race ('we as black people can dictate whatever style we want'). White subject Rachel Dolezal's performance of blackness through hair texture, at the very least, questions the limitations of reducing the authenticity of black identity to skin color (Aitkenhead 2017). In fact, light skinned upper middle class dancehall Sean Paul could be said to have performed blackness in the initial stages of his dancehall career by styling his straight hair into the more African coiffure of corn rows.

However, despite the importance of hair texture in the construction of blackness, skin color, skin tone, or color stratification in the black community and the general public is such a dominant signifier of black identity that it is not difficult to see why skin alteration as opposed to changes made to hair texture is not considered to be of equal significance in the production of blackness. That said, however, Kartel's and Sparta's lightened colorfully tattooed bodies represent the uncomfortable erosion of the boundaries of color. Appreciably, Kartel's and Sparta's experimentation with the 'monstrous' skin bleaching as an ephemeral trend may ironically be actually subversive, as it brings to the fore the accepted racism implicit in making skin color the primary determinant of black authenticity in both the black and white communities.

Conclusion

Dancehall music still represents a way out of the ghetto for many dancehallers (Hope 2006) and, as a consequence, in addition to masquerading the otherness which confines him as a postcolonial subject, the dancehall artist also experiences this double-consciousness on a more economic level, which involves the conscious packaging of reality into something

more palatable for a very likely European subject. This 'Other than him or herself' performance is in reality no different from the subject/object's masquerading of Otherness or the essence of performance itself, except that what the artist packages is *his* supposed reality, *his* authenticity as 'authentic' ghetto subject. Therein lies the double performance, as the constructability of the identity of this ghetto subject enveloped in stereotype is actually hidden in order to successfully project this mythic subject as a true representation of the authentic ghetto self. In other words, the black gangster dancehall subject is the construction of an identity based on social myths of what ought to constitute the black subject from the inner cities of Kingston. Consequently, it is the 'for whom' that determines the effectiveness of the dancehall performance of the grotesque gangster. That is, if the grotesque black body is what the audience wants to see, the intended subversion could lose its effectiveness as it becomes lost in the paraphernalia of the marketing strategy of the performer, a simple signifier in his already commodified image.

Although dancehall does not represent every black postcolonial subject, the lyrics of this urban musical genre does reveal the limited access of the black subject to the power structure which eventually makes him dependent on an Other who has access to wealth, even as he criticizes the position this Other represents. Calling attention to this contradiction and recognizing that dancehall works inside of the very system (because every dancehaller's dream is to 'bus' or become successful and make it out of the ghetto) that isolates the sector of the society it purportedly represents will reveal the law to be nothing but a mythic structure in which ghetto subjectivities are created, hyperbolized, and consumed as real (the Gaza/Gully war). That is, the power of the dancehall discourse would therefore seem to lie in the ability of the artiste to expose these gangsta personas as simply mythical representations deliberately constructed for the sole purpose of entertainment. Referring to his stage persona in the third person as if he were just an observer watching himself perform, Vybz Kartel makes a clear distinction between Kartel, the DJ, and Palmer, the tax-paying citizen.

Vybz Kartel has no social responsibility but to deliver good quality music because I'm an entertainer ... I am an entertainer ... I get paid to entertain and all of this (gesticulates to himself) is entertainment. At the end of the day when Vybz Kartel goes home, Vybz Kartel is Adija Palmer, the father, the baby father, the citizen. (GazaEmpire 2011)

The true transgression of dancehall would then consist of the recognition of this performance of the covering over of the lack in the system which needs to project the myth of the authentic ghetto subject for commercial gain and continued dominance. Nevertheless, as performance has always been about an audience, the dancehall subject's desire and therefore agency cannot be considered without acknowledging the desire of the Other.

In his double consciousness, the black post-colonial subject has the power to expose the lack in the Other in order to procure his or her desire, while at the same time offering him or herself up as the object that fulfils that lack. In this sense, this double consciousness could in essence be considered double empowerment in which the black postcolonial subject both controls the lack and the desire of the Other. As a consequence, by masquerading as the grotesque black body, that is, by consciously performing his or her Otherness, the ghetto gangster postcolonial subject is able to distance him or herself to a certain degree from the stereotype and maintain control of

the representation of their abject self to the European subject, which simultaneously strengthens and threatens the stability of the European subject's identity. In other words, the studied performance of the ghetto subject indicates his or her awareness of the necessity of their abjection. This abjection, in turn, allows the subject to expose the myth in the very construction of their abjection, an awareness which gives them the power to control their subjectivity by negating total fulfilment of the lack in the Other. With this awareness comes empowerment as in the case of Žižek's feminine subject, who is similarly powerful because she is 'far more aware of the unsettling fact that there is nothing, no hidden treasure, beneath the symbolic mandate' than the universal (white male) subject is (1996, 112).

Thus, double consciousness does not necessarily have to mean a position of anguish for the postcolonial black subject. Perhaps Bhabha (1984) was really on to something when he wagered that what the black subject fundamentally wants is for his or her otherness to be objectified as Other. It may be, thus, that the key to the fulfilment of the black subject's desire, and therefore the occupation of the empowering position of agency, is the acceptance that black and white subjects alike are destined to engage in the symbiotic experimenting, constructing and re-constructing of identity with no particular advantage of one over the Other.

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