White Faces in Intimate Spaces: Jamaican Popular Music in Global Circulation

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This study explores Jamaican popular music’s changing engagement with globally networked media technologies. It combines ethnographic analysis of the street dance as a site of urban poor and Black resistance to colonial institutions with an analysis of song lyrics about video cameras at street dances. Newly networked technologies for circulating visual media in global networks affect how Jamaicans perform identity. These technologies also affect street dances’ social function, evoking race- and gender-related pressures that reinforce existing and historic inequalities, reshaping and limiting street dances’ traditional function as a site of autonomy and resistance to colonial inequality. A better understanding of local practices can offer an alternative conceptual framework to help practitioners, scholars, and policy and technology designers avoid reinforcing those inequalities.

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The harms of being looked at

I’m my own man, and as such I do my own thing. When black women stop straightening their hair and wearing wigs and weaves, when white women stop getting lip and butt injections and implants, when bald men stop getting hair transplants, and when people stop getting nose jobs and cosmetic surgery then I’ll stop using the ‘cakesoap’ and we’ll all live naturally ever after. Until then, f**k you all.

This is not a black self-hate thing, because Vybz Kartel is a conscious black brother … Like I said before, I am an entertainer. I get paid to entertain. (Shaw, 2011, para. 4)

Singer Vybz Kartel's defense against his critics marks a newly prominent controversy in Jamaican popular music. In the late 2000s, Kartel chose to bleach his skin from

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its original deep brown color to a pale, grayish tone. Although skin bleaching is by no means new to Jamaica, it is unusual for a famous male performer in Jamaican popular music to publicly and positively refer to his own bleaching. Why, in 2011, did such a prominent figure choose to break the tradition of silence about male skin bleaching, and what do his statements reveal about the changing meaning of entertainment?

During the years coinciding with Kartel’s rise to stardom and his increasingly lightened physical appearance, digital photography and videography have increasingly penetrated local sites of Jamaican popular music performance. These technological changes have transformed both the form and circulatory reach of media derived from the Jamaican popular music scene. Photographers, fans, and performers have used social media platforms and other networked digital media sites to circulate these images far beyond their geographical origins. Digital technology and social media have opened up the media landscape for musical practitioners, they have also opened the landscape to tastes that privilege light skin alongside other things informed by a history of colonial inequality. Vybz Kartel reminds us of this when he draws a direct connection between his skin bleaching and his job as an entertainer. Entertainers must always engage with idealized bodily presentations as part of their work, and the performative space in which Kartel asserts his identity as an entertainer has different boundaries than it would have had 15 years ago.

These intersecting global and local dynamics of racialized, gendered, and sexualized performance standards have also affected other performers, such as the women dancing in the audiences of Jamaican music events. In Jamaica, but also in much wealthier places such as the United States and England, one can now purchase DVDs dedicated to “upskirt” pictures and close-ups of rear ends, crotches, and breasts of female audience members dancing at these local events. One DVD series is called the “punaanyacam” (punaany is a Jamaican Patwa term for female genitalia). Meanwhile, sites such as the U.S. hip-hop website WorldStarHipHop repost scenes from these dances, interpreting women’s performances as pornographic and/or subject to mockery. In the videos, depersonalized, faceless images of Black female body parts, “literally eras[e] black women’s subjectivity” (Hobson, 2003, p. 112). These reposted videos also reinforce sexist and racist attitudes characterizing Black women as depraved and hypersexual. These newly circulating images also introduce a commercial interest based on fetishization and disrespect of Black womanhood, which increases local videographers’ interest in filming women in this way and creates new pressures for female performers. Both Kartel’s experience and the changing pressures on dancing women exemplify how new media technologies can violate the borders of a site that used to afford a space for performers to express themselves on their own terms. Kartel and other performers must weigh their options in the light of a global media landscape shaped by new affordances, rewards, and harms for media circulation.

In this article, I will analyze how new terms of media circulation change the meanings of mediated performance in popular music, using examples drawn from historical and ethnographic fieldwork in Kingston, Jamaica, especially at the street dance: a free, outdoor party that happens late at night on the sidewalks and streets of poor
neighborhoods. My work suggests that images’ increased visibility on globally networked media platforms can harm marginalized communities and their ability to celebrate their identities through various performance practices. Therefore, marginalized people need the power to exclude as much as the power to include.

In this article, I work with two theoretical concepts that can sharpen our ability to make sense of musicking’s social meaning: “cultural intimacy” and “exilic space.” These terms facilitate a critical analysis of changing institutional and technological contexts by foregrounding the conditions that are necessary for resistant or critical community practices to flourish. Thus, they can reframe how we understand the effects of media circulation. “Cultural intimacy,” or, “the cultural traits that define insiderhood, but are also felt to be disapproved by powerful outsiders” (Herzfeld, 2005, p. 174), arises from practices that embody both self-knowledge and self-representation, wherein the self is collectively defined. This intimacy allows marginalized people to affirm as positive the shared traits, situations, and actions that are designated negative by broader society. In Jamaica, the “powerful outsiders” are those closer to the colonial centers of power that identify Black bodies as uncivilized, hypersexual, dangerous, and improper.

The term “intimacy” invites special attention to conditions of physical and emotional vulnerability in relation to intertwining forces of gender, race, and sexuality. Intimacy, by definition, includes vulnerability, and the condition thus requires some protective force in play in order to flourish. Exilic spaces are sites able to foster this cultural intimacy (Gray, 2004). They are especially powerful sites for marginalized people in places like Jamaica, where the state lacks the material capacity to legitimate itself through providing reliable water, electricity, and roads, or by controlling crime. In such contexts, exilic spaces also provide economic, political, and cultural resources for more autonomous life. In relation to Jamaica’s relatively weak state infrastructure, social outsiders, including armed gangsters involved in the drug trade, fill that gap in authority and also provide community resources. These “dons” (as many continue to be known) are able to claim authority and power due to the fact that they are not wholly dependent on formal and legal institutions for support. Paradoxically, their outlaw status actually strengthens their legitimacy as members of the Jamaican public, because formal Jamaican institutions do not welcome those from the dark-skinned, primarily patois-speaking majority of the island. White and light-skinned people who reflect British elite culture have greater access to formal privileges such as media platforms or government positions, but on the same terms, they cannot effectively claim to represent all Jamaicans (and if they do associate themselves too much with poor, they risk losing access to their privileges). Meanwhile, the dons that Gray (2004) identified as alternate forces for order—or forces of an alternate social order—often underwrite popular culture events such as street dances and keep the peace in areas where local police may not be present, effective, or welcome. As will be detailed below, the exilic nature of Jamaican street dances is what makes them able to foster Jamaican identities that are unwelcome and uncelebrated by colonial values.
This dynamic may help to explain why the existence of a haven for marginalized identities and experiences facilitates creativity (Amabile, 1996). The motive to define oneself and one’s community in a positive light in the face of hostility is a powerful impetus for creative expression, and the continuing existence of exilic spaces allows that expression a safe outlet.

The existence of such havens, however, is not a given. Poor communities’ abilities to define and control the physical locations of music making depend on particular legal, social, and technological contexts. Although there is growing scholarship on the different uses that marginalized communities have made of new media technologies (Burrell, 2012; Horst, 2006; Shipley, 2013), many of these studies do not address the characteristics and contexts that are necessary for them to serve a truly liberatory function. One notable exception is scholarship addressing technology and copyright law (Andersen, Kozul-Wright, & Kozul-Wright, 2002; Sargent, 2009); however, their definitions of rights and interests is generally rather narrow. The following discussion addresses new media’s effect on marginalized communities in ways that go beyond traditional concerns of copyright law to encompass questions of dignity and autonomy in relation to bodies, communities, physical locations, and culture.

Media practices on the wrong side of the digital divide

Many entities and governments recommend increasing access to digital technologies and mass communication networks to remedy inequalities between the global South and the global North, despite substantial scholarship suggesting this may not lead to the desired goal. In fact, systems of mass communications can be a “prime site for the reproduction of dependency relations” (Samarajiva & Shields, 1990, p. 86). This observation informs a reasonably long history of critique of projects aimed at bridging the digital divide (Chon, 2005; Gunkel, 2003; Mansell, 2001; Srinivasan, 2012), and it helps explain their mixed results. Communities on the “wrong side” of the digital divide do lack access and means to profit from new technologies, but other realities structure their abilities to profit from engagement in economic and cultural life. Current policy discussions of digital media technology’s value, especially for poor and marginalized communities, do not sufficiently address how race, gender, and class are structuring forces in media platforms. Jamaican musickers’ experiences reveal how new media technologies affect terms of entry into a global media landscape.

As cellular phones, smart phones, video cameras, and telecommunications networks have become increasingly intertwined in daily life, networked technology renders physical and geographic boundaries more permeable. Networked devices are points of entry as well as sites of connection. In particular, technologies can remove or limit class and racial barriers to entry that have shaped the street dance’s resistant and creative possibilities and strengthened their cultural authority. Accounting for cultural intimacy and exilic space can help us reframe communications policy and technology design in order to better serve the interests of marginalized communities.
**Ethnographic engagement in historical context**

This study uses several methods to analyze people’s engagement with music in the context of mediated everyday life. I examine popular music lyrics that reflect the realities of the urban poor and situate them in relation to ethnographic research at live musical events where these songs are played. Ethnographic practices reveal a “dialectical interplay between media and identity” in which “mediated cultural practices enable or disable belongings and the construction and reconstruction of identity” (Ong, 2009, p. 28). Data drawn from long-term, repeated immersion in and observation of Jamaican daily life and cultural practices suggests that belongings—and their social significance—take shape in response to boundaries defined by colonial experiences of class, race, and gender. Fieldwork encompassed 1 year of participant-observation centered in Jamaica’s capital, Kingston, including some smaller towns. I attended numerous musical events, including 19 street dances, and I listened, danced to, sang along with, and analyzed the texts and audio of Jamaican popular songs circulating in the Jamaican media landscape via radio, television, taxi and bus stereos, shops’ and restaurants’ sound systems in an immersive experience of Jamaican daily life. I contextualize these observations with a historical understanding of Jamaican popular music’s social function.

I begin by situating Jamaican popular music in Jamaican cultural and political history, with a particular focus on the legacies of colonialism that still structure popular music’s significance. Next, I focus on the street dance: a long-running tradition of collective social engagement with popular music that roots creative practices in particular resistant and critical traditions. In the middle section, I explore the material and historical conditions that have allowed the street dance to continue to serve this function. Following this, I address how digital photography/videography and their interconnectedness with social media have altered these material conditions, changing the terms of cultural engagement, and identify some ways this has led to a decrease in cultural autonomy and intimacy. Last, I address implications for policy and technical design of new media platforms.

**Flourishing in exilic space: Jamaican popular music**

Jamaican government policy and unofficial social pressures shaped media channels’ design and content, defining a hierarchy in which representations of whiteness and British culture were (and are) at the top. Jamaican radio, a state monopoly until the 1980s, did not play music popular among the poor majority, and the Jamaican state has historically made little investment in venues or infrastructure for popular music. Most strikingly, Jamaican intellectual property law continues to reflect this hierarchy, privileging Eurocentric assumptions and traditions of music making (Bettig, 1996; Toynbee, 2010). Crucial to understanding Jamaican popular music is the stark and racialized economic situation: The vast majority of Jamaicans are poor as well as Black. Thus, Jamaican popular music, or music consumed by the majority of the Jamaican public, is primarily associated with the poor and Black. In contrast, formal
and state-sponsored media platforms historically focused on British “high culture,” seeking to instill cultural traditions associated with Jamaica’s former colonizers. This neglect, however, did not exclude the poor from musical expression.

Outside the formal strictures of law and middle-class social relationships, popular music flourished in poor neighborhoods unconcerned with elite mores and practices. Sites such as the front yards of liquor stores, parking lots, and the street itself became laboratories and incubators for musical tastes, practices, and technologies centered on poor Jamaicans’ experience. Importantly, at least partly due to record players’ relatively high cost, these were sites where groups of people engaged with recorded music together. This method of engagement foregrounded social, collective, and class-based relationships to music, and it helped sites of social engagement with music become a powerful center of authority over Jamaican popular culture. As will be discussed, street dances’ influence in particular is a key factor in why popular music in Jamaica has always been a place where Black and poor faces, voices, and experiences were broadly represented.

Popular music in Jamaica has never been solely for the poor and Black. Despite being marginalized from government or elite tastes, Jamaican popular music has circulated globally along lines of Jamaican migration and other lines of media distribution. Interestingly, at the international level, the Jamaican urban poor gained visibility and success in the global media market on terms not wholly defined by Jamaican elites (Thomas, 2007). These predigital global media networks were circumscribed in three ways that helped practitioners resist the pressures of global media tastes. First, legal copying and distribution was too costly for most Jamaicans, especially because Jamaican musicking practices have always involved reusing musical recordings, incorporating songs, samples, and music from other times and places. Operating within trade and copyright law would have required licenses too costly for most to afford (Manuel & Marshall, 2006; Toynbee, 2010). Formally licensed venues, especially in England and Europe, were also hostile to music associated with the Jamaican poor, due to colonially inflected prejudice (Jones, 1995, p. 13). Thus a great deal of Jamaican music circulated via smuggling, illegal musical events, and pirate radio broadcasts. Second, musical circulation has been shaped by cultural congruence. The language, themes, and sonic elements that Jamaican musickers constantly use and reuse created a self-referential vocabulary comprehensible to people who share those cultural references. Those shared cultural references are rooted in the experiences of the Jamaican urban poor, which meant foreigners often saw engagement with Jamaican music as a political expression, especially in the 1970s, when reggae often symbolized indigenous and third-world resistance (Chude-Sokei, 1994). Third, in Jamaica and beyond, physical access to sites where Jamaicans congregated dictated participation in music, especially in places like England, where class and racial segregation separated poor and Jamaican neighborhoods from middle-class (and non-Jamaican) ones. Jamaican sounds and accents were not familiar to non-Jamaicans, and poor and Jamaican neighborhoods (intentionally or not) were not always comfortable or welcoming places for upper class and/or White would-be participants. Thus, multiple internal and external
limits reduced the influence of colonially informed values, allowing Jamaican popular culture to circulate while continuing to be a force of “transnational racial vindication” (Thomas, 2007, p. 114), subverting and reinterpreting negative characterizations of Black Jamaican-ness at home and abroad.

These predigital networks of media circulation fostered identities and practices that challenged colonial norms, due to their existence outside or at the margins of mainstream social and legal institutions. To some extent, they can be characterized as exilic networks fostering cultural intimacy. They were all, to a varying extent, dependent on association with a vision of authentic Jamaican popular music that centered on the lives, voices, and experiences of the urban poor. The street dance has remained one of the most important mechanisms maintaining this association between popular music and the urban poor.

The street dance: Transgressing property and propriety

Street dances are regular events in poor Jamaican neighborhoods, taking place outside, with free admission, late at night. A street dance includes a “sound system” (speakers, microphones and turntables, or CD players), DJs who select and play recordings, and vocalists. Street dances also include dancers, watchers, listeners, photographers, videographers, and vendors of food, drink, marijuana, cigarettes, and other sundries. Although street dances loom large in current and historic Jamaican popular understanding, people also engage with music in “yards” or “lawns”—enclosed or semi-enclosed spaces associated with local businesses or landowners, as well as in nightclubs and bars. Overall, Jamaican popular music has, since the 1980s, focused on recordings as much as or more than live bands. Because record players and radios were expensive, individualistic listening was associated with upper classes, while collective engagement with recorded audio was more common among the poor. Because of the rise of recorded music, Jamaican popular music events have been physical, historical, and metaphorical sites for poor Jamaicans’ assertion of cultural power. A number of scholars have considered the historical foundations and social function of these musical events (Cooper, 1995; Henriques, 2011; Hobson, 2003; Hope, 2001; Stanley-Niaah, 2010), but few have explored what conditions make it possible for them to function in this way. The street dance provides a useful lens for examining why and how the poor have maintained such a powerful voice in and through Jamaican popular music.

Audiences, dancers, spectators, vendors, and sound system operators shape music’s meaning in the street dance, but also affect production and broadcast decisions. In order to account properly for their influence, I use Christopher Small’s (1998) term “musicking” to describe the totality of human engagement with music: listening, dancing, commenting, singing along, playing instruments, broadcasting, and other activities. This term is especially useful when addressing cultural practices in sites of colonial inequality because it avoids a conceptual separation between performer/writer/producer and audience. Conceptually separating production from
consumption erases the participation of those whose contributions to music do not fit Western definitions of creativity, flattens the relationships between participants, and remarginalizes people already marginalized by colonial hierarchies. In Jamaica, the production/consumption split also reinforces a gendered understanding of creativity, because women are more present on the dance floor than on stage or in the studio, and they contribute actively to the musical experience from that position. Analyzing musicking avoids fixating on particular technologies or byproducts of musical engagement and allows a fuller understanding of the social dynamics involved.

The primary social dynamic in Jamaica is one where elites define the urban poor as perpetually uncivilized, dangerous, and associated with violations of property and propriety. Street dance musicking practices by definition transgress laws of property, and they place people, bodies, and activities as transgressors of propriety as well. Because both property and propriety are aligned with colonial norms of property, street dances are sites of important cultural work. Within these spaces, people denigrated elsewhere in society celebrate themselves together without fear of being criticized for being too poor, too black, or too “boasy” [brash and boastful]. This intimacy is facilitated by Jamaica’s urban poor’s ability to control physical and discursive musicking spaces, while remaining outside the purview of formal law. Thus, Jamaican popular music can function as a site for “the repair of cultural injuries” (Katz, 2012, p. 3).

The product of exilic space: Cultural intimacy

The geography of cultural intimacy

The markers of poverty are evident in lyrics and in the physical experience of street dances. When attending dances during my fieldwork, I often passed by a gully: a drainage ditch by the side of the road, filled with garbage and permeating the air with foul smells. Gullies signify lack of state investment in poor neighborhoods that lack political influence. They have also become symbols of class identity. The term “gully” refers to more than the physical entity; it asserts membership in a community and a way of life. One of Jamaican popular music’s biggest stars, Mavado, rose to fame on the wings of songs celebrating the gully wherein he defiantly asserts “Mi deh ‘pon di gully side [I’m there by the side of the gully/in the poor neighborhood]” (2007).1 Also known as the “gully god,” Mavado and other Jamaican musickers reclaimed this foul, dangerous, and dirty feature of the landscape, this mark of exclusion from the dominant social order. This bold reversal of respectability norms can only be fostered by an identity that is not dependent on the approval of the powerful.

Gullies signal government’s lack of oversight and investment in poor neighborhoods. This neglect also facilitates the street dance’s physical requirements: large gatherings of people, engaging in unlicensed and illegal activity such as high-decibel sounds in public areas. Although the same laws restricting amplified sound technically govern the wealthy and the poor, upper-class neighborhoods are relatively silent, conforming to those laws. When in wealthy parts of town, I never saw speaker towers in public places, and I rarely heard loud music emanating from cars’ open
windows or blasting from houses. In contrast, music was generally more audible in poor areas of Kingston, and at night, I definitely heard a dance before I saw it. Bass sounds vibrate in one’s ears, stomach, bones, and teeth.

Upper-class areas are also more likely to conform to regulation in relation to commerce. Wealthy areas tend to separate businesses from the street and residential areas, but in poor neighborhoods and especially at street dances, snack-sellers cluster at intersections and street corners, ambling through the crowd, balancing their goods on their heads or in their arms. Unlicensed vendors of hot food set up shop alongside the road. These unregulated operations in the cracks of the mainstream economy help to keep money in poor communities.

Thus, the gullies’ sight and smell, the rumble of bass, the smell of cooked food, the cry of vendors, and the mighty towers of speakers that mark a dance also mark a location where laws are less consistently enforced. The site is simultaneously a threat and a haven, depending on your relationship to the dominant social order.

Audible cultural intimacy
Street dances also use language and sound to reflect and maintain cultural boundaries. Popular music’s lyrics are predominantly Patwa, a language associated with poor Jamaicans (Iseke-Barnes, 2004). To participate in Jamaican popular music, one must learn to understand Patwa, which brings one into greater intimacy with Jamaican daily life, especially among the poor. The content of Jamaican popular music also is a mechanism for explicitly resisting colonized values. The song “Ramping Shop” (2010) provides a rich example. An exuberantly explicit song wherein a male and a female singer detail the pleasures of mutual sexual enjoyment, it led to a backlash from prominent political and religious figures who bemoaned it as “musical poison” (Tyson, 2009, para. 1). Government regulations banning explicit lyrics soon followed. Such bans are part of a regular cycle of controversy and backlash in Jamaica, reflecting an ongoing struggle between the elites and the street over values and cultural expression (Wright, 2009; Howard, n.d.). In response, Spice, the female vocalist, asserted that “Ramping Shop” merely describes natural activities and desires, and she hoped it would demystify sexuality and influence people to educate young people about sex: “People think it’s still raunchy but I don’t think it’s misleading the kids, the song is just straight get to the point … Yuh [sic] can’t stop your children from having sex but yuh should teach them — and teach about safe sex” (Henry, 2009, para. 4). Spice asserts an understanding of sex that resists colonial attitudes about autonomy and control of the body and sexual pleasure (Bakare-Yusuf, 2005), and a portion of her authority is rooted in street dance traditions.

Street dances also foster challenges to copyright law (itself a literally colonial institution, remaining virtually unchanged from colonial eras through the 1990s and still retaining the same central assumptions today). In a tradition dating at least to the 1940s, producers (who make recordings for play in the dance) and DJs (who play recordings at the dance) reuse entire instrumental versions of songs as backing tracks for new vocals. In contradiction to copyright, these musickers do not ask permission
to incorporate preexisting recordings into their songs. “Ramping Shop” illustrates this transgression: Vybz Kartel and Spice sang their vocals over an instrumental of the song “Independent Woman” by the U.S. artist Ne-Yo, without permission from the copyright owner EMI. “Ramping Shop” was wildly popular in street dances, radio, and shared digital media among Jamaican music fans locally and globally. Within a few months of its release, EMI sent Kartel a letter alleging copyright violation and demanding all copies of “Ramping Shop” be destroyed. This destruction would have been impossible to fully enforce in the digital era, but the interaction highlights how stronger copyright law enforcement could reshape Jamaican musicking practices locally and restructure their entrance onto global media platforms where such demands could be a condition of entrance.

The constant reuse and reincorporation of musical fragments also reinforces shared cultural knowledge that makes the music more comprehensible (and pleasurable) to those familiar with its vocabulary. Performatively sharing cultural knowledge fosters cultural intimacy among those involved, when that knowledge is centered on the experiences of the poor. These sharing practices flourish in the street dance due to the borders that shape who has access to the physical and discursive space.

**Embodied cultural intimacy**

The physical site of Jamaican popular musicking includes the street [in Patwa: “di road”]. Popular singer Konshens exclaims “gal, you wine [dance] inna di road” in but one of many songs claiming the streets for dance performance purposes. As road use in upper-class neighborhoods is considerably more regulated, the act of wining in the road itself marks, reclaims, and redraws public space as a domain of the poor.

The domain is also marked by the bodies of the majority of street dance audiences and performers: Most are dark-skinned and wearing clothing more colorful and extravagant than the more restrained styles on display at upper-class events. These identity performances challenge the politics that privilege restraint and refinement as essential to a respectable personal identity. Popular dance parties’ names also evince similar challenges: “Boasy Tuesday,” “Dutty [dirty, evoking sexuality and lower-class-ness] Fridays.”

These performances reveal the dance as a site of negotiation with, as well as resistance to, colonial Jamaican norms. Ethnographic evidence reveals these negotiations in a way that simply attending to lyrics or interviews does not. Especially, gender and sexuality performances in Jamaican popular music are more fluid and complex than the lyrics’ often vigorous affirmations of heterosexuality and denigrations of homosexuality (Hope, 2001).² For example, in 2009 I observed a DJ admonish the crowd by saying “Man nuh dance with man!” while roundly ignored by scores of synchronized all-male dancers, many of whom sported bleached faces, foundation makeup, skin-tight neon-pink trousers, plucked eyebrows, lip gloss, and elaborately styled and dyed hair in rainbow colors. While these gender-bending fashions and homosocial dancing ought not be read as directly reflecting sexual identity, they did not particularly affirm heterosexuality and were read by many as challenging it (Hope, 2010).
Jamaican male dancers played with the compulsory heterosexuality and homophobia that are legacies of a colonial system set on controlling Black sexuality (Alexander, 1997). Even in the daytime, when I saw men on the street dressed in ways that reflected beauty and style practices often associated with women, sometimes I heard critiques of their supposed effeminacy, but other times, they were simply identified as “dressing like a dancer” and emulated or admired, especially by younger Jamaicans. Thus, it appeared possible for divergent gender performance incubated in the street dance’s exilic space to be validated in the broader world on terms set by the dance. Street dances’ ability to maintain cultural authority may allow them to be a safer place for men to push the boundaries of gender identity while maintaining allegiance to Jamaican culture.

Women dancers also assert their own politics of performance, reveling in precise and acrobatic moves, partnering with men only on occasion, and otherwise dancing alone or in groups with other women. In 2009, I saw women leap from the tops of speakers to land in splits on the ground, or balance on their head or shoulders upside down, flexing their buttocks and moving their legs to the music. Up close in the street dance, these moves were intimidatingly assertive and highly technical, allowing women to display physical expertise and control. Thus, like Cooper, I read these performances as “self-conscious female assertion[s] of control over the representation of her person” (2004, p. 125).

Featuring parts of the body dominant society framed as not respectable, dancers also “challenge colonial constructs of ‘decency’ and ‘white supremacy,’” asserting “a more liberatory and unashamed view of the body” (Hobson, 2003, p. 101). These performances also derive from African traditions that celebrate fertility and sexuality, and they assert the collective memory of traditions of Black performance (Bakare-Yusuf, 2005; Cooper, 1995; Stanley-Niaah, 2010). Elite culture denigrates such movements as inherently disreputable, which means that this musicking could not achieve such celebratory power outside the context of the street dance. Exclusion from mainstream platforms and media channels has protected street dance participants from this dehumanizing gaze, and allowed them to better control the context for their performances.

The global eye: Cracking open exilic spaces

The rise of the video light
Video cameras have become a regular feature at street dances. I regularly observed “video men” traversing the space with a bright light affixed to the camera, often trailing a cable connected to the sound system power supply. DVDs of these official video recordings sell all over the world, online, and in music and video stores. Sound system owners often split a percentage of the sales with the person who duplicated them. Meanwhile, amateur videographers, using smaller cameras or cell phones, also permeate the space and upload recordings to personal websites, social networks, and music-oriented websites. Sometimes these amateurs are compensated directly for their work; others indirectly enhance their own reputations as scenesters and...
documentarians. Audience members and sound system operators also see being featured in a DVD or in even amateur reporting, as a chance to enhance one’s reputation.

Jamaican musickers have always been aware that being seen, especially by foreign audiences, is important to financial advancement, but the heightened struggle for the video light reveals a new interest in being seen, as global media circulation makes it possible to imagine oneself on an even broader stage than was previously available. Dancers’ vigorous, even violent pursuit of the video light, pathologized by scholar Donna Hope in her term “video light syndrome” (2006, p. 135), highlights the perceived value of potential exposure (“Women Fight for Video Light,” 2008).

The eye of the video light now represents the gaze of a much broader, whiter, and more remote audience. Musickers seeking to capitalize on it are incentivized to satisfy, at least in part, the cultural desires and interests of non-Jamaicans in new ways.

New technology has made it easier for international audiences to have access to the street dance. Cameras, in particular, have shrunk in size and cost and are increasingly embedded in popular devices such as mobile phones, enabling anyone present in a space to document images as well as sounds. The increased presence of networked audio and video devices parallels the rise of the video light as a subject of popular song and marked the beginning of a newly visual and differently global dynamic in Jamaican music media circulation.

As cameras have shrunk, increasing bandwidth has enabled Jamaican and international news and music websites to invite people to upload recordings from music events. These uploads also reach social media networks, YouTube, and other sites that can circulate images from local events farther than ever before, and also remove contextual information that used to accompany CDs, personal photographs, or home videos and shape their reception.

One of these dynamics is the changing set of expectations in relation to appearance. Jamaican popular culture has always been filled with pressures to look good, of particular importance in the context of colonial inequality wherein people risk being judged “uncivilized.” Upper-class Jamaican culture judged bodies themselves, as well as their movements, as excessive and uncivilized if they did not conform in shape and skin tone to Eurocentric standards (Hobson, 2003). Crossover success in the global pop market also reflected similar pressures. Broadly speaking, many traits associated with the poor decreased artists’ ability to reach a mass audience at the global level. Use of Standard English instead of Patwa, as well as light skin, while not always predictors of crossover success, are often correlated with artists’ success at the global level. Thus, directions from Mr. Vegas and Lexxus, to “video light girls” to “Tall-u up inna di video fah yuh cute gal [stand up tall in the video because you are cute, girl]” (2002), also include increasing pressure to defines “cute” in line with global tastes for lighter skin.

Jamaican songs about bleaching go back at least to the 1980s, but the early 2000s saw a rise in songs discussing skin bleaching, often linked with the presence of the video light. In “Video Light,” the group T.O.K. asserts: “Some gal bleach good some gal bleach bad, some gal bleach you wudden check say dem mad [you would think they were crazy], gal nah bleaching cream face get sad [a girl who doesn’t use bleaching
cream on her face gets sad].” Elsewhere, singer Elephant Man uses the phrase “two color face” to describe the uneven skin tone that bleaching creams can cause, and also links these bleaching practices to the video camera’s evaluating gaze: “two color face gal *nuh ready fi di video yet* [not ready for the video yet].” The song’s chorus and title “Nuh ready fi di video yet” present bleaching as feminine preparation (here incomplete) for the video light.

Song lyrics discuss bleaching as such a feminine practice (Hope, 2011) that it is used to insult men by (sexist) association: Mavado, in his ongoing feud with Vybz Kartel, sang that “Addi di teacha [another name for Vybz Kartel] bleach out like Latisha [a woman’s name].” However, ethnographic evidence illustrates a complex relationship between discourse and practice. Despite a longstanding popular discourse of women competing for (male) attention on the dancefloor, I observed male dancers actually dominating the video light. Female singer Macka Diamond decried this situation in her song “Too Much Bull,” wherein she demanded women get their fair share of the video light. Female dancers (2010) publicly supported Diamond’s claim. This development corresponded with a public anxiety over whether it was proper for men to be the subject of an evaluating gaze (Hope, 2010). Ricky Blaze’s tune (2009) “*How mi look?* [How do I look/ How is my look?]” spurred an online controversy that revealed anxiety about the changing power of male performers. “*SINCE WHEN MAN AH ASK MAN HOW MI LOOK* [Since when do men ask men how they look?]” thundered one commentator in all-capital letters at dancehallreggae.com (Marshall, 2008). Blaze’s willingness to subject himself to evaluation suggests there may be new pressures on male performers, a perspective also demonstrated by Vybz Kartel’s evaluation of his options as a performer described at the beginning of this article. This change in male performers’ position is most usefully read not in relation to female performers, but instead, in relation to all performers’ experiences in the broader media landscape. A reduction in Jamaican male autonomy does not correlate with an increase in Jamaican female autonomy but instead may be a reduction across the board since both operate in a White supremacist context.

**Digital media as digital surveillance?**

In Jamaica, globally networked technologies of media circulation are increasingly ubiquitous in daily life, and they are consciously sponsored by state and local programs of Information and Communications Technologies for Development (ICT for D), as well as by foreign aid, charity, and investment actions of technology companies. Many in Jamaica have celebrated the chance to increase musicians’ access to potential markets and audiences, as well as audiences’ access to recordings. The increased transparency of local musicking can provide opportunities for promotion, but it has its dark sides. Some studies of ICT for D in the global South suggest that the fastest-growing trend is to use this technology for tracking, identifying, and categorizing people for the purpose of political repression (Korac-Boisvert & Kouzmin, 1994). In Jamaica, political repression via technology has not been a major concern, but at the same time, surveillance and tracking is appealing to copyright
owners in ways that do not necessarily advance Jamaican interests, especially those of the poor. Copyright ownership overall is still concentrated in the global North, and the prevalence of local practices that contradict copyright make enforcement a mixed benefit for Jamaican musickers. “Infringement” is often defined by U.S. record labels, and does not necessarily relate to non-U.S. legal or cultural traditions. Legal threats from foreign companies against Jamaican musickers over copyright infringement have not yet led to lawsuits, but such demands serve as a warning to would-be international artists about practices unwelcome in the (legal) global music arena.

Global digital media networks can enforce this warning automatically; many media platforms such as YouTube embed technologies that ban, filter, flag, or remove “infringing” materials. Thus, communities of particular practices face copyright-based surveillance technology that could exclude them based on their choices of creative practices (J. E. Cohen, 2006; N. S. Cohen, 2011). Jamaicans closest to Jamaican popular musicking traditions would be most disadvantaged by this surveillance.

Surveillance can also involve decontextualization, fetishization, and defamation. Hypervisible Black bodies can be used to reinforce negative stereotypes of Black sexuality and aggression, which can affect Black communities’ participation in media, autonomy, and access to resources. Outsiders’ ability to gaze into sites of cultural intimacy breaks down some of their nurturing power, increasing the pressure to conform to White definitions of beauty. Rewards that come from being seen are allocated in ways that disadvantage or exploit stereotypes of Blackness.

Poor Jamaicans are often invited to enter into a system of globally networked technology and media that can require them to alter or abandon their creative practices and connections to their communities. These practices and connections, however, have long been a site of struggle toward autonomous practices that resist the norms and institutions of a still-colonial system. Currently, most platforms for engaging with media poorly address these historically established inequalities of ownership, authority, and control over culture and body, which form the basis of individual and community autonomy. Although Jamaicans can choose not to participate, there are strong incentives to do so, especially for the poor.

**Exilic spaces, policy, and technology**

International technological and legal regimes transform the terms on which Jamaican performers can engage with audiences. This transformation has the potential to reshape Jamaican performances and Jamaican bodies. Technology can allow entry by people whose traditions developed outside of the purview of previous industry institutions, but it also can limit their ability to alter their communities’ social position in relation to power. As a matter of policy, whose interpretation of the law and which social norms ought to be embedded in these transnational media platforms? This question cannot be answered without deciding on a set of values related to access and intimacy.

Best (2008) has suggested that the “lag time” between digital technologies’ proliferation in different regions is a crucial “strategic space” in which local (and specifically
Caribbean) communities can develop their responses to new technology. My work here suggests that the strategic value of such space depends on its capacity to be exilic and foster cultural intimacy. Until the values generated by these characteristics can be guaranteed or the structuring colonial inequalities can be addressed, strategic space may be better occupied than ventured out of.

The pressures of a White supremacist media landscape require a solution that engages with the politics of representation. However, there are few working legal solutions to the harms of recontextualization or other insults to dignity and autonomy. Addressing those concerns from a legal perspective would require rights to be redefined to include protection from new kinds of cultural harms, perhaps tied to international human rights of dignity and cultural survival. In the meantime, legal constructs like Creative Commons do allow for some tailoring of rights definition to local interests, for artists entering global digital media networks. Technical remedies or preventions to certain kinds of misuse could be implemented as well. The same technologies that currently enable copyright owners or media companies to shut down sites or block particular actors or activities remotely on media sharing platforms could be used differently in the hands of marginalized communities. Watermarking could prevent tagged videos from being reposted on pornographic sites and could allow people to track down possible offenders and speak back to them in a public or private way. Technologists and policymakers that account for these concerns could thus better serve the interests of marginalized communities, especially those in the global South.

Conclusion: Exilic spaces and cultural intimacy as conditions for autonomy

Street dances have particular characteristics that create and maintain values relating to autonomy and how practices central to the street dance could not occur in more formal, regulated spaces. Many of the creative practices of Jamaican musicking contradict copyright law. The most popular sound systems violate zoning laws. The wildest dance moves can threaten the politics of respectability that privilege upper-class culture or can be reinterpreted to justify racist and sexist stereotypes. Performers seeking fame bet on being rewarded for capitalizing on these stereotypes, as Kartel's skin-bleaching choice dramatizes.

Given the potential risks of new exposure in a hostile media and cultural landscape, what are the responsibilities of those designing and shaping the platforms and technologies available to Jamaicans and others in the global South? Accounting for cultural intimacy and exilic space in technology and policy design would better foster the values of Jamaican musicking and creative practices and better facilitate resistance to exploitative and demeaning treatment in the global media landscape.

Notes

1 Please contact author for more information on locating the recorded music discussed hereafter. It is difficult to obtain complete information for all Jamaican recordings because
many songs are released digitally with no formal physical distribution. In essence this is a cipher for some of the issues raised in this article regarding the legibility and changing contexts of recordings in circulation.

2 The relationship between lyrics and practices of anti-gay violence (Greenberg, 2010; O’Brien Chang, 2009), is a question beyond the scope of this project. However, the theoretical approach developed here could be useful in that debate, illuminating the role and effect of lyrics in (changing) contexts.

References


