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# Jamaican Dancehall Censored: Music, Homophobia, and the Black Body in the Postcolonial World

*The music does everything for the people.  
The music tell the people what to do in Jamaica*  
Bob Marley

## Introduction

I find it strange that Pumpehuset is prepared to have him on stage. It's not a question of a certain song—but rather what he stands for [...] Copenhageners should not be subjected to such filth.

Copenhagen Councillor L.A. Rasmussen, October 2009<sup>1</sup>

The purpose of this article is to point to some effects of the colonial legacy of Jamaica as they emerge in the dancehall genre. My point of departure is the "filth" mentioned above. The garbage metaphor hints at the dancehall artist Sizzla, who in 2009 was only allowed to play in Copenhagen on certain "conditions".

Jamaican dancehall artists visiting Western countries are often put in the centre of discourses of regulation and censorship. Many of those artists are actively engaged in anti-gay discourses, and most do undeniably have songs with rather problematic lyrics on their repertoires—at least when taken at face value: Part of the controversy surrounding dancehall arises from the very question of "the meaning" of songs and lyrics.

## Overview

*Sodomite and batty bwai mi seh a death fi dem.* [I say lesbians and faggots should die]  
Sizzla in the song Taking Over<sup>2</sup>

The questions I seek to explore can be put as follows: What is the relation between Jamaica's colonial history and the present day manifestations of heterosexism and

1 Quoted in *Politiken News in English online* October 16, 2009, accessed September 10, 2014, <http://politiken.dk/newsinenglish/ECE810744/councillor-seeks-sizzla-cancellation>

2 Sizzla, "Taking Over," in *Taking Over* (VP Music Group, Inc, 2006).

homophobia in Jamaican music? What does it mean that the genre in question is often perceived as “black music”? And further, what can the dancehall/homophobia connection tell us about (the limitations of) freedom of musical expression in a Western country like Denmark?

I will argue that the historical background for dancehall—technologically, socially, and musically—are relevant aspects when one is trying to understand the censorship discourses surrounding dancehall in Western societies, not least because both defenders of dancehall and proponents of censorship are using historicized arguments and interpretations.

In the following pages, I will focus on the connections between what I call three aspects of dancehall: *Production*, *content*, and *reception*. The aspect metaphor is chosen to indicate that I am talking about different points of view, not discrete entities. I shall, however, present them separately as analytical categories, while maintaining a discussion of how they interact and overlap in this context. Johan Fornäs’s article “Limits of Musical Freedom,” from 2001, is my inspiration for doing so. Thus it is my premise that the text alone cannot qualify meaning in music and musical performance:

There are no straight lines between **production**, **content** and **reception** when it comes to symbolic forms. Wherever the lines are to be drawn, it has to be made through careful interpretations that take both the textual content and the contextual setting into consideration.<sup>3</sup> (My emphasis.)

This article falls in five main parts. After this introduction, I present the case of Sizzla Kalonji’s near-cancelled Copenhagen performance and the surrounding debate in order to illustrate some of the arguments being used. I also point to some other incidents where dancehall has been involved in controversy in Denmark. Then I take a brief detour through the *production* of Jamaican dancehall as musical sound, and its history as a genre. Since “dancehall” and “reggae” are very often synonymous in the West, it is important to know the quite significant differences between the two, musically, socially, and historically speaking. The third part of the article is about the *content* of dancehall music and the differences between modes of constructing musical meaning that become significant when music is transferred between cultures. The fourth part is about *reception*, not least restrictions on and regulation of Jamaican music. Finally, I will return to the case of dancehall in Denmark and connect it to the larger picture of dancehall’s role in the postcolonial international landscape.

Few Jamaican intellectuals have to this day taken dancehall seriously. One of the few to do so, Literature Professor Carolyn Cooper of the University of West India, often engages in Jamaican and international discussions over the nature of dancehall and its effects on relations between the former colony Jamaica and Western countries. Parts of the following involve a (selective and one-sided, I admit) discussion with her texts.

3 Johan Fornäs, “Limits of Musical Freedom,” Freemuse, 2001, accessed February 5, 2014, <http://www.freemuse.org/graphics/Publications/PDF/musicalfreedom.pdf>.

It is my basic premise that music and lyrics and words in and of themselves can be considered actions. So it follows that expressions can actually have harmful effects.<sup>4</sup> But, crucially, this is not the same as taking any utterance for its surface meaning. As Fornäs says, “Words certainly have effects, but they do not necessarily effect precisely what they say!”<sup>5</sup>

### *Sizzla in Copenhagen*

We are looking forward to welcoming the king of reggae, Sizzla, for a night far out-of-the-ordinary [...] [the last time Sizzla played].....not one arm-pit nor one pair of panties were dry.<sup>6</sup>

From the official announcement of the Sizzla Concert in Copenhagen, October 2009.<sup>7</sup>

*Rastaman don't apologize to no batty-boy. If you dis King Sellasie I, mih gunshot you boy*  
Sizzla in *Nah Apologize* (2004)

On the 19<sup>th</sup> of October 2009, Jamaican dancehall Deejay Sizzla Kalonji was scheduled to perform in the high-profile Copenhagen City venue Pumpehuset. Sizzla has been involved in a number of controversies over homophobia and racism in his lyrics. He has been officially banned from playing in the UK, and some of his songs are black-listed in Germany. His concerts in Europe continue to raise debate.<sup>8</sup>

Sizzla's appearance in Copenhagen went on as scheduled, however, on one remarkable condition: An interpreter was to be present during the concert in order to guarantee that Sizzla would not be saying or singing anything that could get him or Pumpehuset in trouble. In other words, the violently homophobic songs and statements Sizzla is infamous for were not going to be heard in Copenhagen that night. The venue management, defended Sizzla's music (not his lyrics) as “insanely good”,<sup>9</sup> but yet firmly vowed the PA system would be shut down instantly should Sizzla step over the line. This promise came after calls that the concert should be stopped had sounded for some time.

Prior to the promise came a heated debate in the Danish public. Sizzla himself, gay activists, music lovers, experts, and politicians clashed in a public debate on freedom of speech vs. minority protection. The venue Pumpehuset is run partly through

4 Bruce Johnson and Martin Cloonan, *Dark side of the tune : popular music and violence*, Ashgate popular and folk music series (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2008).

5 Fornäs, “Limits of Musical Freedom,” 6.

6 When Danish quotations are translated by the author, the original text is found in a footnote.

7 “Vi glæder os til at byde reggaens konge Sizzla velkommen, til en aften langt udover det sædvanlige” [...] “...og ikke en armhule eller underbuks var tør”. From the official presentation of the concert with Sizzla. Accessed September 10, 2014 <http://www.billetlugen.dk/musik/8619/sizzla/>

8 See Freemuse.org, <http://freemuse.org/archives/5254> for an overview

9 “Det er klart, det er en udfordring, at manden stadig tænker som han gør, selvom han ikke synger sine værste tekster. Men musikken er så sindssygt god, så jeg synes, det fortjener en plads” Uffe Savery, manager of Pumpehuset, in Danish newspaper *Politiken*, 16. October 2009, accessed November 20, 2013, <http://politiken.dk/ibyen/nyheder/musik/ECE810468/pumpehuset-klar-til-at-afbyrde-koncert/>

public funding, and some local politicians noted that tax money should not go to such concerts, and at least one councillor all but threatened to cut this funding over the controversy.<sup>10</sup>

Sizzla was quoted for contradictory statements. For example, within a few days, he apparently said both that he had signed an anti-homophobia treaty for economic reasons only AND that had honestly decided to never engage in homophobia again. We will come back to the treaty later. Here is what Sizzla said:

It was about money, I make my money on touring, and so it was important for to be able to play in Europe again. As an artist and a role model, no one can stop me from telling people what I think is right. I just don't do it officially anymore.  
Sizzla, 16<sup>th</sup> October 2009<sup>11</sup>

It is clear that what I have said has been misconstrued [sic] in an interview I have given since I have been on this tour some interviewers who are granted interviews in good faith may have other motives or axes to grind but I have none, I believe in peace, equal rights and justice for all mankind [...]  
Sizzla, 19<sup>th</sup> October 2009<sup>12</sup>

The second statement came after Pumpehuset had stated that they considered cancelling the concert if Sizzla did not withdraw the first one.

The role of the interpreter was a peculiar one. He was to be there, said Pumpehuset, because Sizzla's rapid-fire Patwa (Jamaican/English creole dialect) is unintelligible to the non-initiated. Thus, ironically, in the case that the singer actually had sung anything problematic, chances are that only a few among the audience would have gotten the message at all.

Sizzla is known to self-censor when appropriate. But he has been playing highly controversial material in Europe recently.<sup>13</sup> The Copenhagen concert was never interrupted, however, presumably because Sizzla stayed on the safe side.<sup>14</sup>

According to the rarely used Danish Penal Code §266b, it is punishable by up to two years of prison to publicly vilify or threaten minorities. I find it beyond doubt that some of Sizzla's lyrics, theoretically, could bring him serious trouble, including prosecution, were they ever played publicly in Denmark. The section in question says:

10 *Politiken News in English Online*, October 16, 2009 <http://politiken.dk/newsinenglish/ECE810744/councillor-seeks-sizzla-cancellation/>

11 "Det handlede om penge. Jeg tjener mine penge ved at turnere, og derfor var det vigtigt for mig igen at kunne spille i Europa. Som kunstner og rollemodel er der ingen, der kan stoppe mig fra at fortælle folk, hvad jeg mener er rigtigt. Jeg gør det bare ikke længere officielt" Sizzla in Henrik Bæk, "Interview: Jamaica's Homofobiske Stemme," *Politiken online*, October 16, 2009.

12 Birgitte Kjær, "Comeback Pumpehuset Gennemfører Omstridt Reggaeconcert," *Politiken online*, October 19, 2009.

13 Henrik Bæk, "Interview: Jamaica's Homofobiske Stemme," *Politiken online*, October 16, 2009.

14 Similar incidents have taken place in Sweden, Germany or Norway for instance. For an overview of incidents involving Sizzla, visit [www.freemuse.org](http://www.freemuse.org).

### §266b

Any person who publicly or with the intention of dissemination to a wide circle of people makes a statement or **imparts other information** threatening, insulting or degrading a group of persons on account of their race, colour, national or ethnic origin, belief or sexual orientation, shall be liable to a fine, simple detention or imprisonment for a term not exceeding two years. (My emphasis)

The formal legal aspect is important because Pumpehuset obviously is operating under Danish law, which is explicitly censorious when it comes to the protection of minorities.<sup>15</sup> So while the presence of the interpreter might make this law-enforced censorship extremely visible and present, it was in fact already there, *and it is always in effect*.

Except from a few comments on the internet, nobody in the public debate defended the artist's right to engage in hate speech or "hate music"<sup>16</sup> in Pumpehuset. So the debate was not so much about the particular repertoire; it was very much about the mere *presence* of the artist.

Many people argued that Sizzla, as an exponent of homophobia himself, should not be allowed to play, no matter what the content of the performance. Some compared him to neo-Nazi musicians, which, they claimed, would never be allowed to play in Pumpehuset, regardless of which songs they would or would not be playing. Some gay rights activists pointed out that exactly *because* Sizzla targets homosexuals (and not other minorities) he was allowed to play. They were saying that homophobia is still broadly socially acceptable in societies where most other forms of prejudice are not—an argument that is backed up by scholars, such as Burne Fone.<sup>17</sup> And so it was maintained that the message sent from Pumpehuset, by hiring the artist, was the real problem.

Nevertheless, the venue tried, with some success, to turn focus towards the *music* and the artistic qualities of Sizzla and away from his lyrics and his public statements on homophobia. Many fans did much the same, by saying that nobody understands much of Sizzlas lyrics anyway, and that this concert was all about music, partying, and *dancing*, not about words or semantics. This is an argument that often shows up when dancehall and homophobia are being discussed in Denmark.<sup>18</sup> The idea that dancehall is mostly for dancing, not listening to lyrics, is something we will return to later.

*I don't care if they ban me  
Damn, me say fi bu'n batty-man, yuh cyah wrong me  
Yow, me nah born over England, a real African this  
Real Rastaman this! boom!*

15 The 266 b has been applied on music at least once; see Johannes Frandsen Skjelbo, "Dancehall og Homofobi – en undersøgelse af Jamaicas populærmusikkultur i postkolonial sammenhæng, med sideblik til musikkens danske reception" (Master thesis, University of Copenhagen, 2009).

16 The anti-music-censorship organization Freemuse has coined this term. See [www.freemuse.org](http://www.freemuse.org).

17 Byrne R. S. Fone, *Homophobia a history*, 1st Picador USA ed. (New York: Picador, 2007), 3.

18 Skjelbo, "Dancehall og Homofobi."

[I don't care if they ban me  
 Damn, if I say we should burn the gays, you can't wrong me  
 (because) I was not born in England  
 I am a real African a real Rastafarian! Boom! (as in gunshot)]  
 Sizzla Nah Apologies (2004)

The lines above shows Sizzla's awareness of the risk of being censored in Europe, but it also shows how he *uses* the censorship he is being subjected to, to position himself as a black, male, and African postcolonial activist who is up against the former colonial powers.

The Sizzla song points to colonial tensions in more than one way. His reference to the Rastafari movement and his own physical appearance with dreadlocks and Rastafari symbols brings up strong associations to another Jamaican star, Bob Marley, and his anti-establishment project. Sizzla sees himself as a political activist in the same way Bob Marley did. And this is something he has in common with most dancehall artists.<sup>19</sup>

### Production

#### The Genre, or Why Dancehall Is Not Reggae

Strictly speaking, "dancehall" is a Jamaican-gone-global music genre that emerged internationally in the '80s following the death of Bob Marley and the general dissemination of cheap music technology that made it possible to create and distribute music without investing heavily in equipment.<sup>20</sup>

Dancehall music is known for its danceability, the impressive vocal deftness of its performers, and its sometimes extremely sexually explicit and/or violent lyrics. The associated dance culture is characterized by a quite obsessive fascination with sex, bodies, and gender roles.<sup>21</sup>

Stylistically speaking, dancehall builds on the concept of the *riddim* (rhythm). The riddim is a backing track, over which a vocalist performs. But it signifies much more than just that. The term riddim (or riddim-method<sup>22</sup>) points to a unique Jamaican field of cultural production that dates back to just after WW2. At its heart is the fact that local Jamaican popular music since the War has been much more about recorded music, technology, and Deejays than live bands.<sup>23</sup> Bob Marley and the Wailers and the

19 Norman C. Stolzoff, *Wake the Town & Tell the People: Dancehall Culture in Jamaica* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2000); Carolyn Cooper, *Sound clash : Jamaican dancehall culture at large*, 1st ed. (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004).

20 P. Manuel and W. Marshall, "The riddim method: aesthetics, practice, and ownership in Jamaican dancehall," *Popular Music* 25, 3 (2006): 447-70.

21 Donna P. Hope, *Man vibes: masculinities in the Jamaican dancehall* (Kingston/Miami: Ian Randle, 2010); Inna Di Dancehall: *Popular Culture And the Politics of Identity in Jamaica* (Kingston: University of West Indies Press, 2006); Tara Atluri, *When the Closet is a Region. Working paper no. 5* (Centre for Gender and Development Studies, University of the West Indies, 2001).

22 The term *riddim method*, coined by Manuel & Marshall (2006), covers this Jamaican technical music-making method as well as some of its wider social and economic implications.

23 Manuel and Marshall, "The riddim method: aesthetics, practice, and ownership in Jamaican dancehall."

other big reggae live acts are in a sense the exception, not the rule. The rock band “format” was used to promote Marley internationally and to make his music and his persona somewhat recognizable to consumers in USA and Europe.<sup>24</sup>

In this sense, reggae as we know it in the West is very much an international (Western), not a Jamaican, phenomenon. I will return to the construction of reggae. The point is that although Bob Marley is and was a hugely important figure in Jamaica, the music of the lowest, black classes never really did sound like the reggae that made Marley famous in Europe and the US from the late 60’s and onwards.

### Saturday Night Dance

Culturally we [Jamaicans] are as old as the cultural history of Africa.  
Olive Lewin, 1971<sup>25</sup>

Dancehall, on the other hand, is arguably more of a local Afro-Jamaican phenomenon. According to American anthropologist Norman Stolzoff, dancehall predates reggae by centuries.<sup>26</sup> In this view, dancehall is much more than a genre; it is a way of *using* music. Stolzoff dates the origins of dancehall back to the days of slavery, where the Saturday night dance was one of the few pastimes in the hard life of the plantation slaves. It was the primary space for sexual and social encounters. Despite the obvious risk of the party turning into one of the dreaded slave rebellions<sup>27</sup>, the plantocracy<sup>28</sup> accepted the dances as a means of “venting steam”, since they knew that banning the dances could lead to uncontrollable amounts of anger among the slaves. The plantocrats also used dances as evidence that the slaves thrived and enjoyed themselves. In this sense, the dancing was another factor in the justification of slavery.<sup>29</sup>

As Stolzoff points out, the function of the dance(hall) as the place for the underprivileged to construct their own identities and to negotiate the borders between them and the upper strata of society has continued to this day. This is part of the reason why attacks on dancehall are perceived locally as attacks on black culture. In the ghettos of Kingston, outdoor dance parties are frequent and very popular. Stolzoff demonstrates how the Jamaican police force fear, but also explicitly acknowledge, the dance as a “safety valve” and how this ambivalence is articulated on the streets. “Recognizing the cathartic effect of the dancehall, a policeman at a dance one night told me; “Jamaica would explode if it were not for dancehall”<sup>30</sup>

The strong metaphor of the dancehall as the musically constructed *place* for black Jamaicans goes way back. The dancehall veteran Hedley Jones speaks of dancehall as a

24 Stephen A. King, Barry T. Bays, and P. Renée Foster, *Reggae, Rastafari, and the rhetoric of social control* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2002).

25 Olive Lewin, “Jamaica’s Folk Music,” *Yearbook of the International Folk Music Council* 3 (1971): 15-22.

26 Stolzoff, *Wake the Town & Tell the People: Dancehall Culture in Jamaica*.

27 Slaves outnumbered the whites by 20:1. The Haitian uprising in 1789 proved that the risk of the slaves taking over was very real.

28 A plantocracy is a political order or government composed of plantation owners.

29 Stolzoff, *Wake the Town & Tell the People: Dancehall Culture in Jamaica*, 26.

30 *Ibid.*, 7.

kind of transferable space over which “we”, i.e. the black underclass, hold ownership: “Dancehall has always been with us [...] because we have always had our clubs, our marketplaces, our booths... where our dances were kept. And these were known as dancehalls.”<sup>31</sup>

The music for the dances was in the slavery days provided by slaves mastering a variety of different European and African genres. This led to hybrid genres, in particular *mento*, which was characterized by its “Africanized”<sup>32</sup> dance moves, its syncopations, and lyrics that often dealt with the hardships of slavery, sexuality, and everyday problems. Typically the mento lyrics were (and still are) fashioned in an understated or even coded way, using humour, metaphors and double entendres to make sure that only the initiated understood their true meaning.

An example from a traditional mento song shows how sexualized discourses were sometimes put to music in a not-so-subtle coding:

“My ripe tomato, my ripe tomato  
Surrounded by a bush  
And to reach that tomato, you always have to push

My ripe tomato, my ripe tomato  
You can pick my tomato  
That is, if you have your right-size tool”<sup>33</sup>

The sexual explicitness that generates much of the modern critique of dancehall truly has old roots.

### Uncontrolled Sexuality

What the plantocrats saw in the dance was a confirmation of the belief that the slaves were in no control of their sexual drives. An idea which was easily employed to reinforce the racist worldview that was a result of, as well as a precondition for, the slave-based economy. As Lewin demonstrates, by quoting a 19<sup>th</sup> century eyewitness to a slave dance:

“Sometimes they stamped their feet while performing voluptuous movements of the body. [...] The body was writhed and turned upon its own axis while the dancers slowly advanced or retreated from each other. They would be nearly naked and their writhing approaches to each other were highly sexual”<sup>34</sup>

Of course, this account is to be seen in the light of the ambiguity involved in the white gaze on the black body: The exoticist fantasies of the black as a more natural creature

31 Ibid., 23.

32 Mento dancing probably grew out of a fusion between European Quadrilles and African dances. See also *ibid.*

33 Transcription of traditional provided by on-line mag *Perfect Sound Forever* <http://www.furious.com/perfect/jollyboys.html> 03-12-2014

34 Lewin, “Jamaica’s Folk Music,” 17.



free from the burdens of civilization are also a part of this picture. The very idea that black music and dance are connected to savage, uncontrolled, and animalistic sexuality is still around, says Jamaican literature professor and dancehall scholar Carolyn Cooper: "Everything that black people do is demonized."<sup>35</sup>

Following this point of view, the typical misconceptions about dancehall are much the same today as they were in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and before. According to Cooper, the Jamaican establishment (still) fails to see dancehall for what it really is: An authentic expression of African politics of the body, not just an unregulated celebration of material hedonism and vulgarity, as it is often depicted in mainstream Jamaican media. Importantly, she sees the Western condemnation of homophobic lyrics as a variation of the same problem—namely, that African sexual discourses are not easily interpreted by outsiders.<sup>36</sup>

### Homophobia in Jamaica. The Law and the Colonial Legacy

It should be observed that Jamaica is a place with sky-high rates of crime, violence, and corruption. On a global scale, Jamaica is one of the most violent societies on the planet, in league with Afghanistan or Chechnya.

The Jamaican penal code section 76-80, regularly referred to as the "sodomy laws", that deals with homoerotic encounters is literally colonial. It stems from Victorian legislation from mid-19<sup>th</sup> century. It states that a man that engages in the "abominable crime of buggery" can be punished with up to ten years of prison.<sup>37</sup>

Jamaica is a principally Christian country, with Pentecostalism and similar strains being predominant. Only a very small fraction can be considered Rastafarians. The country's institutionalized homophobia evidently has roots in the hard-liner reading of the Old Testament, which is characteristic of the Jamaican strain of faith, as Cecil Gutzmore puts it.<sup>38</sup> This, in combination with Victorian sexual norms and legislation from the 19<sup>th</sup> century, explains the Jamaican attitude towards homosexuals to some extent. However, other factors are also at play, and some of those connect with post-colonial "blackness" and perhaps indirectly with "black music". Some of the taboos concerning anal sex and homosexuality may even be older than Jamaican slavery. At least there is evidence that male-male homosexuality in sub-Saharan Africa has historically been associated with diseases and has been condemned as a foreign habit: "Biblical prohibitions against homosexuality and Victorian norms of Euro-American morality that have only recently been undermined in our much more liberal times are thus reinforced by Afrocentric proscriptions."<sup>39</sup>

35 Andreas Johnsen and Rasmus Poulsen, *Man Ooman (Man Woman)* (Denmark: Rosforth, 2008), DVD promotional copy.

36 Cooper, *Sound clash : Jamaican dancehall culture at large*, 107.

37 Section 80 even gives police officers the right to arrest people pre-emptively if they are even suspected of being about to commit the above crimes. Albeit this is only effective during nighttime.

38 Cecil Gutzmore, "Casting the first stone!," *Interventions: The International Journal of Postcolonial Studies* (2004).

39 Cooper, *Sound clash : Jamaican dancehall culture at large*.

It seems fair to at least hypothesize the implied relation here, although the research on historical African attitudes towards homosexuality is rudimentary.<sup>40</sup> In Jamaican discourse, homosexuality is often connected with diseases and unnatural use of the body and its openings. An interview with an anonymous Rastafarian Elder in Jamaica Observer makes this clear:

It is simply that he [the average Jamaican] cannot condone the abandonment of the clean 'nip and tuck' of normal heterosexual relations for the **unhygienic** foray amid waste matter, unfriendly bacteria and toxic germs [...]

Then, attempting to sanitize their abnormal, patently **unnatural** inclination, they [the gays] refer to it as an "alternative lifestyle"<sup>41</sup>

These discourses on naturalness are reminiscent of white racist ideas of the black (slave) as a "natural" being with an instinctive and unspoiled sexual drive as presented earlier.

In context of this article, this again brings us close to the sticky idea that blacks are naturally more "rhythmic" or musical than whites. We will come back to that.

### The Sound System

After WW2, musicians and live-bands were scarce in lower-class urban areas in Jamaica. Many musicians had found jobs in the booming tourist industry; others had immigrated to the UK. But parties were still everywhere. Ingenious people found out that the gramophone could be amplified by means of PA-systems made for public speech. And so, the technology of the sound system was born, and soon after also the DeeJay, as the one in charge of operating it was nicknamed. The combination of the DeeJay, his music, and his equipment shortly became an entity: The *sound system* or "*sound*" for short.

From early on his job was also to nice-up the dance and not least to compete aggressively with other sound systems for the attention of paying customers. To meet the challenge, DeeJays took up the mento tradition and started singing, joking, talking, and *toasting* over the music to single their sound out from the rest. The toasting was very much about the sexual competence and *machismo* of the DJ, often exaggerated to completely unreal proportions. Prince Buster, a legendary dancehall pioneer, framed himself playfully as a gangster and a dangerous person by mixing in sound effects like gunshots and screeching car tires in his performance. The toasting skills, the sound volume, and the clever selection of music became the weapons in a symbolic war between sound systems.

A skilled DeeJay can perform entire narratives via a sequence of songs utilizing parameters such as tempo, style, and feeling, often without the lyrics of the individual songs or the semantics of the toasting having particular significance. This is not the same as saying that such a performance does not *mean* anything. Quite the contrary. But the meaning is sometimes emerging from the constellation of tracks being played,

40 B. Chevannes, *Betwixt and Between: Explorations in an African-Caribbean Mindscape* (Ian Randle Publishers, 2006), 25.

41 Mark Wignal, "The Rasta view on homosexuality," *Jamaica Observer*, April 22, 2007.

stopped, and played again in a considered manner, not from the semantics of the individual song's lyrics.<sup>42</sup>

Eventually a local recording practice grew up around the sound systems to supply each one with their own original music for their arsenal. Importantly, the recordings were often not meant for distribution or broadcasting in the traditional sense. The extreme example is the emergence of the *special*—a unique master recorded for one sound system only, as a guarantee of its originality. Sometimes the special was provided on fragile acetate, which had the peculiar effect of deteriorating while being played.<sup>43</sup> The similarity to ammunition being irrecoverably spent in a war is rather striking. Competition among sound systems is still fierce, and it sometimes spills over into real violence.<sup>44</sup>

By the mid-60s, the Deejays themselves began making studio recordings of their own voice-overs plus riddim, or *tunes*, as the combinations of riddim and the Deejays verbal performances are frequently called. Importantly, the backing part of such tunes, the riddim, would take on a life of its own, without any copyright issues to speak of: A single often included an instrumental version of the riddim on the B-side for others to use for their own cutting, mixing, and voice-over, using the simplest of technology.

And so, to make a long story short, by the '80s where affordable recording- and PA equipment began to hit the market, there was in Jamaica a decade-long aesthetic tradition of copy-paste production, where voice-overs and riddims had become independent of each other.

### The Riddim and the Voice of the Deejay

Most dancehall tunes are structured via technically simple, yet elaborate, usage of riddim and voice. The following example is an analysis of the core elements of the tune Boom Bye-Bye<sup>45</sup>, which is recorded on the riddim *Flex (Time to 'ave Sex)*, named after the 1992 tune by Mad Cobra. Flex itself is an explicit song which deals with a heterosexual relation in a quite direct sense.<sup>46</sup>

Boom Bye-Bye was arguably the first tune to cause international discussion about homophobic messages in dancehall. Yet it was a radio hit in the US early in 1992, until a member of the US Jamaican diaspora provided a translation of the words.<sup>47</sup> Literally translated, the chorus is about killing gay men and the song expresses a general loathful attitude towards (male) homosexuals.<sup>48</sup> It should be noted that the tune's lyrics are not representative of Buju Banton's production as a whole; nevertheless, it provides a useful example of how words and music interact in the dancehall idiom.

42 Stolzoff, *Wake the Town & Tell the People: Dancehall Culture in Jamaica*, 54.

43 This practice is far from unknown today, despite the abundance of digital gear

44 Stolzoff, *Wake the Town & Tell the People: Dancehall Culture in Jamaica*.

45 Buju Banton, *The Early Years (90-95)* (Heartbeat Europe, 2002).

46 Mad Cobra, Flex, *dancehall 101*, Vol. 3 (VP Music Group, 2002)

47 Timothy S. Chin, "'Bullers' and 'Battymen': Contesting Homophobia in Black Popular Culture and Contemporary Caribbean Literature," *Callaloo* 20, no. 1 (1997): 127-41.

48 The song is readily available from services like iTunes and Spotify, often without hints to its volatile content

An excerpt from the chorus:

*Boom bye bye*

*Inna batty boy head*

*Rude bwoy no promote no nasty man*

*Dem haffi dead*

[Boom goodbye, goodbye

In a faggot's head

Rude boys ("tough guys") don't promote no nasty men

They have to die]

The riddim is made out of a simple 4/4 drum pattern, a two bar bass groove, and a melodic motif played by a bright, almost cheerfully sounding, synth-bell. Harmonically, the riddim is self-contained, still eerily ambivalent, seen from the perspective of harmonic analysis. There is no harmonic progression, no further chord changes or substitutions, which in other popular genres work as form-creating elements. The root key never becomes firmly established. Such harmonic/tonal ambivalence is a common trait in dancehall.<sup>49 50</sup>

So musical progression in the traditional sense does not contribute to the musical form of this typical dancehall tune. Instead, the variations, which provide some feeling of forward motion, consist almost entirely of the cutting and mixing of the drum, bass, and motive tracks.

The simple (or absent) structural development leaves the vocalist—the DeeJay—with the core responsibility for driving the individual tune forward. On one hand, it might seem the repetitive riddim thus demands attention be drawn to the lyrics. On the other hand, the individual tune cannot be taken as a "message" or a *work* in the way that you typically would, for example, a Western rock song. The lyrics, as *semantics*, indeed are sometimes to be considered more or less inferior in the dancehall: "[...] hence, **in some contexts**, the lyrics may receive more critical attention than they might merit, insofar as they may be valued by dancers primarily for their rhythmic flow rather than semantic message."<sup>51</sup> (My emphasis)

Summarizing the production aspect of dancehall, I argue that the low-tech life-performance oriented production environment that defined the genre from around 1950 has had clear aesthetic/artistic implications ever since, no matter how advanced the hardware has later become. The fundament—the riddim-method—is still the paradigm for making and using music. It should also be clear that the vocal performance of the DeeJay has its roots in a fiercely competitive environment, where standing out is a matter of survival, and where lyrics understood as meaning is a complicated matter.

49 Manuel and Marshall, "The riddim method: aesthetics, practice, and ownership in Jamaican dancehall," 559.

50 A more profound analysis can be found in Skjelbo, "Dancehall og Homofobi." <http://freemuse.org/archives/1440>

51 Manuel and Marshall, "The riddim method: aesthetics, practice, and ownership in Jamaican dancehall," 460.

*Content. The (Body) Language of the Dancehall*

### Disintegration of the Song Body

Danish dancehall DeeJay Egger put on *Boom Bye Bye* while operating his turntable in a fashionable club in Copenhagen in 2005 in front of a dancing crowd. That is, until persons from the audience told him to stop, when they recognized the tune (or at least the riddim). Then Egger “pulled” the pick-up, a musical act, which in a dancehall context does not mean that the tune is “over”, necessarily. Sometimes DeeJays tease the audience, *the massive*, by playing only fragments of a particularly popular tune before playing it as a whole later in the evening.<sup>52</sup> So it is rather uncertain what it actually meant to play, and then stop, a track the way Egger did that night. It certainly problematizes many concepts of (self-)censorship.

A journalist was also present at the club. He later condemned the incident in a major newspaper under the title *Tolerance; we do indeed shoot gays* as an example of a new homophobic trend in club and dance culture, but he also noted that the DeeJay had stopped playing the tune when asked to do so.<sup>53</sup>

In the intense online debate following the incident, Egger explicitly made the point that stopping, or pulling, the track was *not* an act of (self-) censorship. He wanted to play the tune as an act of freedom of speech, and he, and other fans and DeeJays discussing the incident, obviously agreed that the dancehall DeeJay performance practice in itself changes the meaning of the music being played.<sup>54</sup> There seems to be consensus among Danish dancehall DeeJays that the musical context is more important than the words of any given tune.<sup>55</sup>

### Slackness and the Punanny

“With all this sort of competitiveness, the only way people could get the better of each other is by being more extreme.”

Gussie Clarke, producer, quoted from Lloyd Bradley<sup>56</sup>

Jamaican dancehall culture is highly sexualized. One can find examples of lyrics with an explicitness that might surprise even a seasoned fan of gangsta rap or similar genres. One of the first exponents of this sexually explicit sub-genre, known as *Slackness*, is Yellowman, who started his career in the early '80s. His persona boasted a sexual capability of unreal proportions and he praised the female body in a very direct language. Especially the Punanny,<sup>57</sup> the vagina, had his love and his whole-hearted attention.

Admiral Bailey followed Yellowman's sexual style, and in 1987 he recorded what is perhaps the most iconic slackness tune ever, *(Gimmie) Punanny*. The following excerpt demonstrates the song's main theme in no uncertain terms:

52 Stolzoff, *Wake the Town & Tell the People: Dancehall Culture in Jamaica*.

53 Lasse Lavrsen, “Tolerance: Man skyder da bøsser,” *Information*, July 19, 2005.

54 For a Danish transcription of the debate, see; Skjelbo, “Dancehall og Homofobi.”

55 Ibid.

56 Lloyd Bradley, *This is reggae music : the story of Jamaica's music* (New York: Grove Press, 2001).

57 As far as I know, there is no consensus of the spelling of “punanny”

*Gimmie punanny waan punanny*  
*Gimmie punanny waan punanny*  
*Gimmie punanny waan punanny*  
*Gimmie punanny waan punanny*  
*Coolie punanny, chiny punanny, blacky punanny*  
*Whity punanny any punanny a di same punanny...*

[Give me vagina, I want vagina, Give me vagina, I want vagina....etc  
 Indian vagina, Chinese vagina, black vagina, white vagina any vagina is the  
 same vagina]<sup>58</sup>

Shabba Ranks (double Grammy Winner) has also recorded his share of slackness tunes. The following example, *Wicked inna bed* from 1989, is among the most well-known.<sup>59</sup> What makes Shabba Ranks' tune important here is its playful and humorous coupling of heterosexuality with homophobia and violence.

*All a di girls go tell di world dat I am wicked in bed*  
*Bad, mad, and a wicked inna*  
*All a di girls go tell di world dat I am wicked in bed ...*

*Inna fi mi bed mi don't waan Alfred*  
*Don't waan Tony mi don't waan Ted*  
*Mi nah promote maamaman [(litt "motherman") = derogatory term for male homosexual], all maamaman fi dead*  
*BAM BAM!!! Lick a shot inna a maamaman head*<sup>60</sup>

It is quite common to see heterosexual explicitness in concurrence with homophobia, such as in the example above. One can find this in the individual tunes as well as in larger musical structures, such as a sequence of songs played by a DJ. Jamaican journalist and reggae historian Kevin Chang sees a pattern in this:

The established tradition that never fails to drive crowds wild is **Boom Bye Bye** followed by **Love Punanny Bad** and a string of slackness classics like **Position**, **Backshot** and **Stamina Daddy**. It may not be uplifting art, but as they say, it doesn't get any more real. (The invariable pairing of **Boom Bye Bye** and **Love Punanny Bad** deserves serious academic study.)<sup>61</sup>  
 (Chang's emphasis)

The Punanny is not the Jamaican equivalent of the word "pussy" or similar semi-vulgar terms, with which it is sometimes confused. The Punanny is much more than

58 LP: Admiral Bailey, "Punanny," in *Kill Them With It* (Jammys/Live & Love, 1987).

59 I personally recall having been dancing to the song in Copenhagen numerous times, without having a faint idea of its semantic content

60 Single: Shabba Ranks "Wicked inna Bed" (Digital-B, 1989)

61 Kevin Chang, *Jamaica Gleaner online*, December 18, 2008, <http://www.jamaica-gleaner.com/gleaner/20080224/focus/focus2.html>

just the female sexual organ. It is in most Jamaican contexts associated with motherhood, attractiveness and an overall reverent attitude towards women as life-bearers and mothers, says Cooper.<sup>62</sup> (Cooper, 2004)

As Cooper puts it, the frequent mentioning of the female reproduction system in one form or another in the dancehall is not necessarily sexist; it is *African* in a way that most non-Afro-Jamaicans fail to understand: "The flamboyantly exhibitionist DJ Lady Saw epitomizes the sexual liberation of many African Jamaican working-class women from airy-fairy Judaeo-Christian definitions of appropriate female behaviour."<sup>63</sup>

Lady Saw is a female DeeJay/singer with a reputation of engaging in extreme slackness in some of her stage shows and videos. She is a respected singer of other genres as well, a fact which perhaps emphasizes the point Cooper is trying to make: Women in the dancehall make their own (sexual) choices much more than they get credit for. When other feminists accuse dancehall music and dancehall culture of misogyny and complains that it is reproducing patriarchal norms, Cooper questions their personal competence in the field as such: "So what sounds to [American feminist writer] Obi-agele Lake's unseasoned North American ears like abuse of the female body can be re-interpreted from a Caribbean perspective as an X-rated affirmation of the pleasures of heightened sexual passion."<sup>64</sup>

At this point, I have shown some examples of how homophobic lyrics are often connected with hard-core heteronormative slackness. This connection indeed confirms the classic feminist notion that homophobia and general male sexism are just two sides of the same patriarchal system.<sup>65</sup> But Cooper turns this argument around somewhat. She does so by, at least partly, placing homophobic lyrics as a *subset* of slackness in general. And so it follows that role play, metaphors, humour, and playfulness, all part of the slackness discourse, are in fact also to be considered part of the subset of homophobic discourses. So just as a knife is to be taken as a metaphor for a penis in a tune by Lady Saw and not as an instrument of sexual violence, the gun Buju Banton is shooting with in Boom Bye Bye is in fact also a metaphor: "In the final analysis, the song [Boom Bye Bye] can be seen as a symbolic celebration of the vaunted potency of heterosexual men who know how to use their lyrical gun to satisfy their women."<sup>66</sup>

In Cooper's analysis, the general negative attitudes towards dancehall held by the Jamaican establishment are deeply based in the repressive patriarchal and colonial views on black people and women. She does not deny the virulent homophobia in Jamaica, but she reads dancehall as a whole, not least slackness, as an emancipatory strategy employed by the colonized against the colonizer.

62 Cooper, *Sound clash : Jamaican dancehall culture at large*, 244.

63 Ibid., 99.

64 Ibid., 101.

65 Chin, "'Bullers' and 'Battymen': Contesting Homophobia in Black Popular Culture and Contemporary Caribbean Literature," 129.

66 Cooper, *Sound clash : Jamaican dancehall culture at large*, 160.

### *What is Patwa?*

Patwa, or patois, is the creolized English spoken (or at least understood) by most Jamaicans and to some extent in Diasporas. It is a powerful marker of class and, ultimately, of skin colour.<sup>67</sup> Tunes in Patwa are by far the most common within the dancehall repertoire. The dialect, or language, depending on point of view, has been vilified as bad English, but also valorized as a genuine expression of empowered Black Jamaicans.<sup>68</sup>

Patwa belongs in the informal, personal, and oral domain. English is still undisputedly the language of formal encounters, literature, and the upper strata of Jamaican society.

Patwa is often incomprehensible to the non-speaker, even though it is built on English vocabulary and grammar. But, importantly, most Jamaicans do understand and speak both languages, and so it follows that which language is used in any given situation is a *choice* by the speaker... in theory, at least. As Cooper demonstrates, using Patwa in the wrong situations can lead to serious trouble. Part of the heavy critique of dancehall in Jamaica is the argument that Patwa destroys English and ruins the language skills of Jamaican youth.

When Boom Bye Bye was a hit in the US in the early '90s it was partly because nobody understood what the lyrics were really about, until a specific translation started a heated debate. However, the polemic was not just about translating Patwa into "standard" English (whatever that is). Using subversive language in the postcolonial struggles with the former colonist is a well-known strategy, often employed by the subaltern artist as a means of showing or even changing power relations. The very choice of language and the use of specific phrases and words in the dancehall can be perceived as black Jamaicans "writing back" to the centre, as this artistic phenomenon is termed by Ashcroft et al. in "the Empire Writes Back".<sup>69</sup>

In the case of Boom Bye Bye, it was argued that the translation that led to the controversy was biased and one-sided in more than one way. For example, it was stated that the postcolonial aspects of the translation were largely ignored in the USA.<sup>70</sup> Below, I discuss Carolyn Cooper's point of view on this.

Firstly, the very title "Boom Bye Bye" is not a correct transcription. The original title, says Cooper, was Boom *By By*, with *By* being an onomatopoeic for a ricocheting projectile, NOT a "final goodbye". A ricochet, more or less by definition, does NOT hit its target. The iconic fading howling is the sound of a damaged projectile flying away after having hit something hard. A point Cooper does not mention, but which in fact supports her analysis.

67 TJL Unit, "The Language Attitude Survey of Jamaica," *Jamaica: The University of the West Indies* (2005).

68 Cooper, *Sound clash : Jamaican dancehall culture at large*, 281-90.

69 B. Ashcroft, G. Griffiths, and H. Tiffin, *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-Colonial Literatures* (New York: Routledge, 2002).

70 Chin, "'Bullers' and 'Battymen': Contesting Homophobia in Black Popular Culture and Contemporary Caribbean Literature."



More generally speaking, the use of concepts like murder and killing in dancehall discourse are merely macho metaphors for getting rid of something unwanted. Furthermore, the batty-boy that is “killed” is not a representative of the gay community. To think so is to colonize Patwa by thinking it semantically similar to English:

First, the derogatory word “batty-man” itself illustrates the use of graphic imagery in Jamaican Creole [Patwa] to express abstraction. The explicit Jamaican word “batty-man” encodes a very precise naming of the place to which the sexual propensities of the homosexual are presumed to incline literally. “Batty,” the Jamaican Creole word for buttocks, compounded with “man,” encodes anal sex.

[...]

Thus, taken out of context, the popular Jamaican Creole declaration, “all batty-man fi dead,” may be misunderstood as an unequivocal, literal death-sentence: “all homosexuals must die.” Read in its cultural context, this battle cry, which is appropriated by Buju Banton in “Boom By-By,” primarily articulates an indictment of the abstraction, homosexuality, which is rendered in typically Jamaican terms as an indictment of the actual homosexual: The person (the homosexual) and the project (homosexuality) are not identical.<sup>71</sup>

With the Jamaican expert, Cooper, having had the last word, I will summarize the *content* discussion by pointing to three things: Firstly, one can argue that the field of production in which dancehall emerged makes it complicated to translate the meaning of its content without qualification. Secondly, the anti-establishment, anti-colonial nature of dancehall makes any attack on its products look neo-colonial to some extent. And finally, it is important to note that the idea that sexual explicitness (slackness) is a black emancipatory strategy, strangely, can make critique of homophobia seem even racist.

### Reception

#### The Reggae Island. Mythology, Music and Money

*The next song is about how much easier life would be without women.*

S, Danish Musician before playing No Woman No Cry<sup>72</sup>

Some of the Western critique of dancehall homophobia, draws conceptually and rhetorically on certain ideas of what Jamaican music “really” stands for, namely things like nature, peace, love and tolerance.

I postulate that “Jamaican Music” in the West is a construction and a result of strategies employed by the Jamaican tourist industry and the Western music industry. It is a perhaps trivial, but still amazing, fact that the country Jamaica is world famous almost exclusively through its popular music culture. Billions of dollars come from

71 Cooper, *Sound clash : Jamaican dancehall culture at large*, 160.

72 From my private recordings, 2005

the musical branding of Jamaica.<sup>73</sup> The tourist industry is an active part of this process and it is in many ways inseparable from the music industry, because of their obvious economic interdependence.<sup>74</sup>

Marley's political militancy was gradually bended away from local Jamaican political and racialized issues towards a more universally acceptable or "generic" image of a spiritual man singing for justice and peace. As King et al state it, songs like *Get Up Stand Up* are so unspecific that they lend themselves easily to all sorts of freedom discourses all around the world.<sup>75</sup> The sound of Marley's music was altered in the transfer to the Western markets, with tempo changes and tracks dubbed by British and American musicians as some of the hearable results.<sup>76</sup>

Marley's hit song *No Woman, No (Nuh) Cry* was not about the carefree life of the sexually free male bachelor or about the burdens of romantic love. With *Nuh* being a general negation, in this song it means "don't" cry. In its original context, the song is about a man comforting a woman in the hardships of poverty.

Probably, the Jamaican political establishment's strategic adoption of the Rastafarian symbols and iconography and the branding of Jamaica as a lush tourist paradise via reggae are parts of the explanation why Marley's deeply political songs can change their meaning so radically. King et al have written extensively on this hypothesis in King et al 2000.<sup>77</sup>

Cooper points out that some of Marley's lyrics can definitely be read as sexist and problematic in many ways. She attacks the idea that dancehall is always more sexist than reggae.<sup>78</sup> Jason Toynbee and Danish journalist Henrik Bæk note the transformation of the revolutionary outspoken black activist Marley into something almost everyone can endorse.<sup>79</sup> The more unpleasant aspects of the Rastafari movement are also often ignored. Rastafarianism can to some extent be connected with racist Black supremacy discourses, for example.<sup>80</sup>

Marley was not always all about peace and love, which is clear if one looks at the titles of his albums, for instance. Whereas the early Marley/Wailers records had titles with words such as *rebellion*, *survival*, *uprising*, and *fire* in them, the *post mortem* compilations are much more peaceful and downplays the fighting rhetoric. Instead, the natural, the mystic, and the peace are foregrounded.

What is perhaps unknown to some European readers is that at least one Wailers albums published in the early 1970s had photos of black guerrilla warriors with automatic weaponry on the cover.<sup>81</sup> If one compares this with the later compilation cover

73 King, Bays, and Foster, *Reggae, Rastafari, and the rhetoric of social control*, 121.

74 Ibid.

75 Ibid.

76 Ibid., 99.

77 Ibid.

78 Cooper, *Sound clash : Jamaican dancehall culture at large*, 83.

79 Jason Toynbee, *Bob Marley: herald of a postcolonial world?* (Cambridge: Polity, 2007), 2; Henrik Bæk, "Det jamaikanske tordenskrald," *Politiken*, October 16, 2009.

80 Toynbee, *Bob Marley*, 164.

81 For example *Soul Rebel*, Trojan, 1970

art, sporting a smiling Marley with a ganja cigarette on a lush green background, the tendency is rather clear. In *Reggae and Caribbean Music* Dave Thompson says the following about the (Western) reception of Marley:

Bob Marley ranks among both the most popular and the most misunderstood figures in modern culture [...] That the machine has utterly **emasculated** Marley is beyond doubt. [...]

Instead, the Bob Marley who surveys his kingdom today is smiling benevolence, a shining sun, a waving palm tree, and a string of hits which tumble out of polite radio like candy from a gumball machine. Of course it has assured his immortality. But it has also demeaned him beyond recognition. Bob Marley was worth far more.<sup>82</sup> (My emphasis)

So Cooper's argument that Jamaican dancehall is easily misunderstood also ties to Western reception of reggae.

### The Black Body and the White Head

*...Damn, ...it should be okay that a nigger comes by once in a while and says some stupid things to 3-400 dancing people who do not have a faint idea of what the guy is doing anyway.*

K, Moderator at Danish dancehall forum<sup>83</sup>

The idea that black dance music is not to be taken intellectually serious is perhaps as old as the concept of black music itself. It is my argument that the residual racist essentialism behind that point of view is alive in public discourse on dancehall. I would like to point again to the public statement from the Venue Pumpehuset in defence of Sizzla's concert, found in the introduction to this article, "the music is insanely good." The way the venue manager juxtaposes lyrics and music hints at which one is the important, and that is certainly not the semantics of Sizzla's lyrics. The use of the term "insane" in such a context also brings up Ronald Radano's classic argument that black music connotes loss of control, insanity, intoxicating agents, etc.<sup>84</sup> The references to wet panties and sweaty armpits also found in the beginning of this article also serves to exemplify how dancehall is positioned as talking to the body.

I am not trying to imply that the persons in charge of Pumpehuset or the moderator quoted above are racists in any sense. Nevertheless, they do act within a discourse, which for example Walser and McClary find problematic:

Those who have accepted such theories have often embraced African and African-American musics as sites where the body still may be experienced as pri-

82 Dave Thompson, *Reggae & Caribbean Music* (San Francisco: Backbeat, 2002), 159.

83 ...så må det sgu' også være ok at der kommer en neger forbi i ny og næ, og siger nogle få dumme ting til ca. 3-400 dansende mennesker der alligevel ikke fatter et kvæk af hvad han har gang i... KZ, moderator at Danish Reggae/dancehall portal in E-mail correspondence 2009.

84 Ronald Michael Radano, "Hot Fantasies: American Modernism and the Idea of Black Rythm," in *Music and the racial imagination*, ed. Philip Vilas Bohlman (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000).

mordial, untouched by the restrictions of culture. Yet although such attitudes may sometimes contribute to cross-over and to promoting the appreciation of black music, the cost is enormous. For in such accounts, the **mind and culture** still remain the exclusive property of Eurocentric discourse, while the **dancing body** is romanticized as what is left over when the burdens of reason and civilization have been flung away. The binary opposition of mind and body that governs the condemnation of black music remains in force; even when the terms are inverted, they are always ready to flip back into their more usual positions.<sup>85</sup> (My emphasis)

Marley as well is linked to discourses of exoticism and naturalism. The sexual connotations of Marley the Rastafarian, not to mention the bodily, repetitive and bass-driven music he is associated with, are arguably part of sexualized Western conceptions of black males in general, again following King et al's view of the male Rastafarian as a sex symbol and (sex-)tourist attraction.<sup>86</sup>

### The Reggae Compassionate Act – Censorship and the Dancehall

There is not one but many silences, and they are an integral part of the strategies that underlie and permeate discourses.

M. Foucault<sup>87</sup>

I dare presume that instances of censorship in a broad sense against dancehall and on all levels of this culture is far more frequent in Jamaica than is the case in US or Europe, where dancehall acts as a rule have been targeted solely because of homophobia. The language, the sexual content, the homophobia and the perceived glorification of gun violence has led to numerous cases of artists being banned from airplay or just accused of leading Jamaican youth astray.<sup>88</sup>

Knowing that reggae in its origin is a highly racialized, militant black and sometimes even violent political music, it is interesting to notice that the notion of peaceful reggae as the *opposite* of violent and homophobic dancehall was invoked in what became known as “the Reggae Compassionate Act”. This document was an attempt by British LGBT group OutRage! at making dancehall artists sign a treaty in 2007. The treaty was not just about the artists agreeing not to perform homophobic material in the West. It defined what Jamaican music is about—or should be about. Some excerpts follow here:

Throughout time, Reggae has been recognized as a healing remedy and an agent of positive social change.

We will continue this proud and righteous tradition.

85 S. McClary and R. Walser, “Theorizing the Body in African-American Music,” *Black Music Research Journal* 14, 1 (1994): 75-84. 76.

86 King, Bays, and Foster, *Reggae, Rastafari, and the rhetoric of social control*, 121-23.

87 Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Vol 1*, vol. 1 (New York: Vintage Books, 1988), 27.

88 Cooper, *Sound clash : Jamaican dancehall culture at large*, 168.

[...]

We do not encourage nor minister to HATE but rather uphold a philosophy of LOVE, RESPECT and UNDERSTANDING towards all human beings as the cornerstone of reggae music.

This Compassionate Act is hereby calling on a return to the following principles as the guiding vision for the future of a healthy Reggae music community:

- Positive Vibrations
- Consciousness raising
- Social and Civic Engagement
- Democracy and Freedom
- Peace and Non-Violence
- Mother Nature
- Equal Rights and Justice
- One Love
- Individual Rights
- Humanity
- Tolerance and Understanding

We, as artists, are committed to a holistic and healthy existence in the world, and to respect to the utmost the human and natural world. We pledge that our music will continue to contribute positively to the world dialogue on peace, respect and justice for all.

To this end, we agree to not make statements or perform songs that incite hatred or violence against anyone from any community.

ONE LOVE<sup>89</sup>

It is still disputed who really did sign this treaty at the end of the day.<sup>90</sup> In addition, it is unclear why they did so. Sizzla said to Danish Newspaper Politiken that he signed solely to be allowed to play in Europe. However, he later denied having said so.<sup>91</sup> What is significant is that the Reggae Compassionate Act is almost an artistic manifest of sorts, stating what "healthy" Jamaican music is about.

The Reggae Compassionate Act seems influenced by the constructed image that leaves out the darker sides of Jamaican music. The explicit mentioning of acceptable themes comes close to what one might call "constitutive censorship,"<sup>92</sup> since it positively defines what you can say, not what you cannot say. The assertion that dancehall artists should "return" to the role of the all-peaceful reggae star is thought-provoking.

89 Full version at [http://www.soulrebels.org/dancehall/w\\_compassionate\\_001.htm](http://www.soulrebels.org/dancehall/w_compassionate_001.htm)

90 See the Web site "Murder inna dancehall for the full story. [http://www.soulrebels.org/dancehall/f\\_apology.htm](http://www.soulrebels.org/dancehall/f_apology.htm)

91 Politiken, Oktober 19, 2009

92 Beate Müller, "Censorship and Cultural Regulation: Mapping the Territory," *Critical Studies* 22, 1 (2003): 1-32. 1.

A Danish TV journalist made it clear that the image of Marley as a representative of Jamaican music is rather fixed when she started an interview about the 2009 Copenhagen Sizzla incident with the statement “Well, many of us do indeed know about Bob Marley... but who is this guy...Sizzla...?”<sup>93</sup> By appealing to a specific framing of Marley as the *opposite* of Sizzla, she effectively prevented any nuanced discussion of the matter. My point is not that there is no difference between Marley and Sizzla, but rather that the binary opposition between “good” and “bad” Jamaican music is an interesting construction.

### *Summary and Concluding Remarks*

The case of dancehall/homophobia shows how discourses of skin colour, sexuality, and music production (and regulation) are complexly related. A full account of the significance and importance of Jamaican music in and out of Jamaica is, of course, much bigger than this one topic. Nonetheless, I have hopefully demonstrated how the issue of homophobia highlights some thought-provoking residuals of colonialism in a specific musical context.

I would like to summarize some of my points in relation to the organizing themes of this article, production, content, and reception.

To some degree, it might be pointless to try to derive fixed meanings or messages out of one single dancehall tune. Exactly because it never really *is* permanently fixed. The production culture mixes up improvised live performance and recordings to the point where reification of songs or “tunes” becomes somewhat meaningless. Impermanence is at the heart of this way of making music. The “Eagger incident” demonstrated how knowledge of production/performance practice has considerable effect on the perceived meaning of musical actions. This is not to say that “anything goes, because it is all about context,” but it is worth remembering that dancehall is very much about the particular moment, not the fixed message of the musical work.

When it comes to discussions of the homophobic content of specific songs, one should take the genealogy of the genre into account in order to contextualize arguments. The argument against censorship is often that the lyrics should not be taken at face value. To some extent, this article supports that view. Patwa speakers notoriously use very colourful metaphors. The explicitness and general roughness of the dancehall lingo suggest that lyrics about killing and murder are not automatically to be perceived as real threats or as incitement to violence in the legal sense.

On the other hand, Jamaican dancehall artists frame themselves as activists with political messages and a claim to be taken seriously. That fact makes it interesting that Pumpehuset (and others) dismisses the semantic message and tries to separate music, artist, and lyrics.

93 “Mange af os har jo hørt om Bob Marley...Nu er der ham her Sizzla...Hvem er *han*?” TV NEWS Denmark, Interview with Johannes Skjelbo, 18<sup>th</sup> of October 2009

The idea that black music is something that talks to the natural body rather than the civilized mind does possibly influence discourses on dancehall in and outside of Jamaica. Historically speaking, reception of black music has always involved an element of sexual/body anxiety. Only this time it is Western *liberal* sexual politics, not Victorian norms, that are under fire. The challenge will be to counter this attack without again resorting to stereotyping based on pigmentation.

Part of this complex is that heteronormativity is still sometimes used as a marker of "blackness" or "African-ness," at very great costs for homosexuals in countries like, for example, Uganda or Zimbabwe. But also in the Western world, not least in the US, there are strong connections between homophobic discourses and blackness.<sup>94</sup>

It has been discussed in Denmark whether or not Pumpehuset was acting as a censor in its own right in the 2009 case. The inferred threat of having a translator monitor the artist could make it seem so. But as I have shown, Danish Penal code section 266b is always in effect, and anyone could hypothetically have reported Sizzla to the police had he played any hate music. With Johan Fornäs you could say that the situation in Copenhagen 2009 was one where censorship can be considered legally justified, since Sizzlas expressions could hypothetically harm "very important interests", and since the suppression might *prevent* such harm.<sup>95</sup>

I also see the translator as a message from the venue to anyone concerned about the concert. A message saying that even coded homophobia is not accepted in Pumpehuset. A more cynical (and speculative) interpretation could be that the risk of the concert having serious economic repercussions, like funding being withdrawn, led the venue management to hire the interpreter.

It remains uncertain to what extent it was the presence of the interpreter or rather the attention following the debate before the show that kept Sizzla from stating his views on homosexuals in Pumpehuset in October 2009. We cannot not know what could have been, of course. With Foucault we could say that that there are many forms of silence.

94 Elijah G. Ward, "Homophobia, hypermasculinity and the US black church," *Culture, Health & Sexuality* 7, 5 (2005): 493-504.

95 Fornäs, "Limits of Musical Freedom".