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Lyrical Threat, Musical Poison: Vybz Kartel and Spice's *Ramping Shop*

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Creeping beyond the boundaries of genre, geography, artistic license, and economic ownership, "Ramping Shop" is a most dangerous pathogen. Released in November 2008, the song hijacked the instrumental track from United States R&B recording artist Ne-Yo's recent hit, "Miss Independent," transforming it into a raunchy lyrical romp that details the heterosexual exploits of Vybz Kartel and Spice, two of dancehall's most popular artists.¹ Its danceable beat and explicit lyrics detailing hardcore sexual activity in plain and literal terms

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situate it in a subgenre of dancehall music called “dagging” music. While “Ramping Shop” is certainly not unique in its lyrical content, it has been used as a pole around which to center discussions of obscenity and ownership, indexing the complicated and intersecting ways that dancehall has proved and continues to prove socially, artistically, financially, and geographically uncontainable.

Dancehall music, movement, and lyrics are both prolific and symbiotic in nature. *Riddims* (recycled, usually electronically-produced instrumental tracks) provide the framework for songs, which both mimic and generate dance movements in a loop of interpenetration between movement, music, and thematic content.² These riddims, which serve as the building blocks for most dancehall songs, are part of a tradition that began much earlier. Deejays as early as the 1950s used “toasting” as an artistic technique, adding their own style to songs by ska bands. In the 1980s the digitization of rhythms enabled dancehall as a nascent genre to auto-reproduce at a breathtaking pace (Hope 2006: 10). The widely practiced remixing, re-fixing, and re-licking old rhythms not only connects dancehall to its musical predecessors but also encourages the production of multiple, similar songs in which dancehall personalities must constantly out-do each other. Facilitated by this productive recycling, the practice of one-upmanship in terms of lyrical violence, sexual “rawness,” public feuds, daring dress, and hardcore dance practices has dominated the dancehall aesthetic. Dagging, therefore, is an indicator for many politicians, educators, and concerned parents (usually of a certain education and economic standing) that dancehall has already gone too far.

Branding the (National) Body



Las May/gleaner company limited, 2009.

According to its detractors, the embodied practices of dancehall dance are mutating as social practices beyond dance-floor boundaries. Critics in the press view sexually explicit songs as “filth,” “poison,” or “garbage” that menaces the social body by endangering the individual bodies of Jamaican children. For example on 3 February 2009 the *Jamaica Gleaner* published “‘Ramping Shop’ – musical poison,” a heated essay

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by outspoken dancehall critic and school principal Esther Tyson. After quoting her students about the prevalence and negative effects of the song, Tyson connected Kartel's lyrical content with the degradation of Jamaican bodies and the Jamaican Body: "Until the decent, well-thinking citizens of this nation begin to be outraged and put a stop to this airing of filth, then we have condemned ourselves as a nation doomed for destruction." Five days after the publication of Tyson's complaints, the Jamaica Broadcasting Commission issued a "directive to licencees [*sic*]" banning the transmission "through radio or television or cable services, any recording, live song or music video which promotes the act of 'dagging', or which makes reference to, or is otherwise suggestive of dagging" (6 February 2009).³ The Commission's decision illuminates the productive looping that occurs in dancehall music and movement, placing dancehall lyrics in a position of instruction, and framing dance as a rehearsal for social behavior.



Vybz Kartel & spice

Although critics have decried the danger of dancehall to Jamaican youth, they ultimately lament its disconcerting potential to "cross over" national boundaries and thus challenge hegemonic and often commercially motivated representations of Jamaican culture. In another recent article in the *Gleaner* (22 February 2009), former Prime Minister Edward Seaga locates dancehall culture in an anarchistic, minoritarian space, describing its producers and consumers as "young people who have shallow religious roots, detached from civil society, distanced from the tradition of the family, impatient with frustrating economic barriers and deprived of social space, creating their own order rooted in their own values and imperatives." At the same time, for Seaga, "dancehall subculture" stands to compete with reggae as the accepted "brand" of Jamaica. He demands a decision between "reggae as a global brand with positive world-wide acceptance, or dancehall, with its supporting markets of positive and negative vibes." Yet these remarks seem to point to an ambivalence between attempts to both marginalize dancehall culture and to respond to its ubiquity and catchiness. Looking apprehensively outward, he seems to call for the careful protection of Jamaica as a place where tourists can visit to relax...and spend foreign currency.⁴

Participants met on 4 March 2009 to discuss similar issues, this time in Brooklyn at a community panel organized by the Coalition to Preserve Reggae music (CPR): “Could dancehall be the ruination of reggae and, by extension, the Jamaica brand?” As Jamaicans throughout the diaspora voice similar concerns, narratives of contagion through obscenity and ownership are intertwined. According to the *Gleaner* (8 March 2009), panel organizers Sharon Gordon and Carlyle McKetty said, “If something is not done soon, the minds of our youths will be corrupted by decadence and they will act out that decadence...our youths will be in danger of being irrevocably impaired [...] leading to a retarded society of tomorrow.” These remarks, like those of Seaga and Tyson, imply not only that dancehall possesses the capacity to degrade Jamaican bodies, but that the bodies that speak through dancehall are perhaps not authorized to do so, or threaten the jurisdiction of official voices over Jamaican public image.

Intellectual Property and the Informal Economy



"The Economy"

Las May/Gleaner Company Limited, 2009

Dancehall as a musical genre emerged in the atmosphere of economic constrictions following experiments with internationally sanctioned structural adjustment. Faced with a decreasing quality of life, increasing unemployment, dwindling resources, and the devaluation of the Jamaican dollar, many Jamaicans, particularly the swelling number of urban poor, turned to the informal economy for sustenance. This shift coincided and fueled the production of dancehall culture as performing artists, songwriters, deejays, sound system operators, hype men, videographers, vendors, tailors, dressmakers, hairdressers, and dancers contributed to an informal and alternate economic space (Hope 2006: 16-17).

In dancehall production, power is thus decentralized and production often Do-It-Yourself. The use of premade riddims allows for instant responses between artists, long mixes with multiple singers, and an inexpensive mode of creation that doesn't necessarily take place in a recording studio.⁵ As widening access to technology expands the roster of potential dancehall

artists, it also increases the stores of material from which dancehall can be composed. YouTube becomes both raw source and an engine of distribution, as dancehall/dagging music virally embeds itself in songs of the international formal economy, and the new versions circulate without geographical restrictions.

But such virulence inevitably leads to clashes between the formal and informal economies. On 28 January 2009, Vybz Kartel received an email from EMI stating that “Ramping Shop” infringes upon the copyright of “Miss Independent,” and that clearance would not be granted for use of the track. Because Kartel operates outside the major label system, EMI contacted him directly rather than discussing grievances through a chain of command that normally includes producers, managers, and label executives.⁶

The reaction of EMI to Vybz Kartel and Spice’s “Ramping Shop” and the heated debates that continue to take place in Jamaica reflect anxieties of contagion and containment that mirror the viral reproduction of dancehall media. Moreover, these debates circulate throughout the Jamaican diaspora, which itself arose in part as a result of the same economic constriction that spawned dancehall culture. Attempts to curb the spread particularly of dagging dancehall lyrics and dancing have been legitimated by the need to protect youthful Jamaican bodies from contamination and pollution of the social and embodied practices that are associated with the space of the dancehall. At the same time these debates seem to culminate in questions of legitimacy. Who may use a certain instrumental track? Which artists should receive state support? Who has the right to represent Jamaica(ns)?

Virile Virality



YouTube Ramping Shop

In their email to Kartel, EMI representatives also demanded that “(i) all recordings of the infringing track will be recalled and destroyed and that no further copies will be issued, and (ii) that the audio and/or video will be taken down immediately from all Internet sites.” But this last request is almost laughable.⁷ Recalling the original conditions of dancehall production, the internet decentralizes social relations around music and dance in ways that make global circulation inevitable, and the legal containment of viral media difficult if not impossible. On

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YouTube, Kartel's version of the "Miss Independent" riddim coexists not only with other iterations (Stargate's first flop, Ne-Yo's "Miss Independent," DJ remixes of Jay-Z, Lil Bow Wow, amateur voice-over versions, and even other dancehall songs by Beniton, Sizzla, Busy Signal, and Vybz Kartel himself) but also with homemade videos made in bedrooms and dancehalls by YouTube users.

In the right-hand column of the YouTube page, these various versions wink at, flirt with, and taunt each other in automatically assembled playlists of "Related Videos." Dangerous poison to both the Jamaican social body and the national brand, Vybz Kartel seems to laugh. As critics attempt to censor and vilify the song for its role in poisoning Jamaica's image and future, Ramping Shop is featured in commercials for Kartel's own brand of prophylactics, "Daggerin" condoms. The song, while wildly popular as a dancehall anthem, serves double duty as an advertisement for safe (if rough) sex and protection against direct, prevalent, and nondiscriminatory forms of physical contagion.

For further viewing:

Lil Bit – "Forget About Me" <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-aSHyfk3UHw>
Ne-Yo – "Miss Independent" <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=k6coobo3nzQ>
Vybz Kartel & Spice – "Ramping Shop" <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=16t0gPT8bRg>
Vybz Kartel & Spice – "Ramping Shop (Radio Version 2009)" <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PPquFx7k-zA>
Busy Signal – "Gangsta Nuh Bleach (Kartel Diss)" http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vTraA_AvR4Y
Busy Signal – "Tightest" <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kfw0pJUyT34>
Beniton – "Miss Independent Dancehall Remix" <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LFBuOIGSGn8>
Sizzla – "You Should Know" <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=P0v4BQrKZw>

Zena Bibler acaba de terminar su maestría en el Departamento de Estudios de Performance en la Universidad de Nueva York. Antes había estudiado Historia Latinoamericana en la Universidad de Yale, donde también se desempeñó como coreógrafa y bailarina con el grupo *A Different Drum Dance Company* en Yale y el grupo *Young People's Creative Dance Theater* en Weston, Connecticut. Sus intereses académicos son la historia y las políticas del movimiento y el movimiento en la política y en la historia. Su último más reciente es un mapa interactivo de experimentos continuos con movimiento en Union Square (Nueva York). Para verlo, siga el link: <http://dansperiments.blogspot.com/>.

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Notes:

¹ The song has spent 14 weeks on Hype TV's music chart (as of 11 April, 2009) and has achieved moderate airplay in US radio and club circuits as well as explosive popularity on YouTube.

² In the production of a dancehall hit, the division of labor is distinct from that of typical record production. It is a collaborative process in which a song creator creates a rhythm track (*riddim*) over which artists and deejays layer lyrics. At a dancehall event, promoters, producers, sound systems, hype men, and dancers further add to the selection, order, and content of the songs which are then preserved and transmitted by photographers, videographers, and finally distributed to radio stations and consumers in sound and video.

³ The statement further outlawed the transmission of "any audio recording, song, or music video which employs editing techniques of 'bleeping' or 'beeping' of its original content" and required that station owners "take immediate steps to prevent transmission of any recorded material relating to 'dagging'..." Oddly enough, the decision to ban bleeped songs implies that the public to be protected is already familiar with the original lyrics *and* their meanings, ultimately undermining an attempt to stop the spread of dagging vocabulary and practice.

⁴ Reggae music has become involved in the dissemination of the Jamaican tourist destination. Glossing over the political nature of Bob Marley's "One Love/People Get Ready", a 1990s advertising campaign revised the lyrics: "One love, one heart, come to Jamaica and feel alright" (Cooper 2004: 189-190).

⁵ In fact, many mixes, especially confrontations, "counteractions," or battles are recorded live by audience members.

⁶ Ironically, Stargate's "Miss Independent" edit was a cannibalization of a previous Stargate-produced song that failed to achieve the same notoriety.

⁷ Vybz Kartel and Spice released a version that replaced the original lyrics with automotive metaphor over a new riddim. "Vybz Kartel Spice - Rampin Shop (New Radio Version 2009)"