FUNNY MAN: PERFORMANCES OF MASCULINE IDENTITIES IN DANCEHALL MUSIC
FROM LATE 20TH CENTURY JAMAICA

By

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Introduction

Gender expression is a deeply personal facet of human identity, as it is informed by individually-held values, behaviors, and feelings. At the same time, it is also by definition an outward display, and as such is informed by the perceptions of others and must be thought of in a social context. These two approaches exist at the same time, and while there is often tension between them, they do not negate one another. Exploring this tension as part of the multiplicitous nature of gender expression is an important part of engaging with systems of power in a critical way. Analysis of gender expression cannot take place in a vacuum, though, so understanding the other social power dynamics that exist within the same cultural context is a necessary step in further nuancing that discussion. This is especially true in Jamaica, where the long histories of colonialism and patriarchy intersect to create a power imbalance that privileges only a select few definitions of masculinity.

Colonialism and patriarchy are systems that distribute power inequitably, and as such, the evolution and perpetuation of these systems need to be analyzed in order to work toward establishing a more just and equitable world. Jamaica has not been a colony for decades, and the enslavement of people was made illegal long before that, but patriarchy has entrenched itself in Jamaican politics and pop culture in a seemingly-indelible way. This is an unfortunate, but not-unexpected consequence of the nature of the British-Jamaican colonial relationship.

Jamaica was a British colony for over 300 years, its people unable to act independently of the Crown from 1655 to 1962. Even though Jamaica has been an independent nation for almost sixty years, the longevity of its status as a colony has resulted in generational trauma. British influence left scars on the way that the Jamaican people govern and interact with one another.
The process of colonialism requires the colonizer to create an imbalanced power structure and to legitimate it in a variety of ways. Not only did British colonists use racism and the enslavement of Africans as tools of oppression, but they also coupled that with structurally-integrated sexism. The performances of masculinity that white, British, colonist men exhibited were privileged in nearly all social and economic contexts. These performances included homophobic and misogynistic acts of physical violence to yet again find ways to legitimize colonialism. Any deviation from their example was punished, and any imitation of their example was privileged, which led to self-perpetuating cycles of violent attitudes and practices in the wake of independence. Epidemic levels of violence against women and non-cisgender-heterosexual men have persisted in Jamaica due to the patriarchal values that condone sexism and homophobia.

Political discourse and social expectations have remained relatively consistent in their traditional and conservative (read: echoes of British-colonial) tolerance of gender expression, with cisgender-heterosexual\(^1\) men historically taking up the most space in conversations about what is and is not acceptable. This has led to a stringent set of social codes that, even in artistic and commercial circles such as the pop music market, place a target on men who do not conform to standards of appearance or sexuality. Capital-M “Men” have long been expected to be stoic, physically powerful, and heterosexual. Such ideals of masculinity are not unique to Jamaica, nor to dancehall (take, for example, American hip-hop, where similar projections of masculinity were longstanding parts of the genre’s mainstream\(^2\)). This version of masculinity is both hegemonic and subject to change, at the same time an overbearing ideal to live up to and a series of practices dictated by the reality of daily life. Through this confluence of social pressures and

\(^1\) Cisgender-heterosexual is a phrase common enough in this paper that it will be henceforth abbreviated to cis-het.

\(^2\) This paper will not delve further into that comparison, but it is a fascinating avenue for further research.
practices, Jamaican men enforced a system for one another where they performed their identity according to a set of very narrow definitions of masculinity, whether or not they personally agreed with those ideas. While resistance to gender-based power structures within Jamaica’s dancehall scene has long existed -- since the genre broke out in the mid-1970s -- the country’s social and political conditions did not allow for it to flourish in the mainstream until the new millenium. Looking at dancehall as it grew through the 1980s and 1990s allows for a multifaceted examination of a genre, culture, and time that has become known for upholding these norms of masculinity.

**Methodology**

At its heart, this paper seeks to answer questions about how systems of power are built and how they are perpetuated. Dancehall masculinities, specifically those from the 1980s and 1990s, act as one set of instruments to explore a microcosm of the larger world that is toxic, hegemonic masculinity. Since music is only a fraction of a fraction of the realm of pop culture, the attitudes and performances of those men who make music only represent a fraction of a fraction of the general population. That said, the men who achieve fame due to their music -- or the ways in which they present themselves within that context -- have an outsized influence on the direction of broader social shifts due to their increased amount of cultural capital.

The purpose of this research is not to say “men do bad things,” rather, it is to engage critically with those systems that lead to oppressive actions and attitudes. Dancehall music, as a genre and a cultural phenomenon, evolved as a natural progression of cultural context rather than a radical departure from it (even though it was derived from countercultural movements and practices), which helps to explain the historical elements that bind it so closely to toxic
performances of Jamaican masculine identities such as gun violence and misogyny. As such, the performances and attitudes discussed herein will be framed through the dichotomy of hegemony “versus” counterculture. \(^3\) “Versus” is placed in quotes because no behavior can fit so cleanly into one box or another; hegemony is a notion in constant flux, especially given 50-60 years of time over which cultural practices change and take on new meanings. Michel Foucault, noting that black-and-white dualities such as this are overly reductive (if not entirely useless), says that “we must not imagine a world of discourse divided between accepted discourse and excluded discourse… but as a multiplicity of discursive elements that can come into play in various strategies.”\(^4\) Some pieces of cultural practice are inherently countercultural and others are hegemonic, but most fall somewhere in the middle, completely dependent upon the context of the actors who perform them, neither “accepted” nor “excluded” in their own right. In order to problematize these categories and to explain why some actions and attitudes were enshrined in the Jamaican cultural canon while others were not, the following questions will be considered: Are performances of masculinity in Jamaica from the 1980s and 1990s -- specifically those of men who create and consume dancehall music -- countercultural practices? How useful is the counterculture-hegemony dichotomy as a framework for exploring performances of masculinity? And how do performances of masculinity engage in the critique and/or perpetuation of systems of power set in place through colonialism?

Primary source analysis in this paper will focus mainly on lyrical analysis of dancehall songs, as they strike a precarious balance of being both autobiographical accounts of the artists

\(^3\) While her work is not explicitly referenced in this piece, this author bases the theory of gender as a performed identity on the work of Judith Butler -- specifically, her 1990 book, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*.

who perform them and tiny little packages of zeitgeist specifically designed for mass consumption. By looking at both the individuals who create dancehall music and the broader cultural understandings that allowed them to become successful, this paper will touch upon the following topics: gender expression as performance in its own right, legacies of colonialism in Jamaica as they relate to creating and dismantling power structures, and the differences between counterculture and hegemony to place performances of masculinity into context.

The specific examples of historical evidence, cultural practice, secondary literature, and song choice provided in this paper are by no means an exhaustive list. It is impossible to fully explain something as multifaceted as “performances of masculinity” or “Jamaican National Identity” in any length of writing, let alone something as short as this. The pieces of context provided by this author are simply that: context. Countless other factors exist in explaining the development of Jamaican masculinities -- Rastafarianism, education, colorism, and the economic impact of exports that are not music or film to name a few -- and they are all vitally important. But they are beyond the scope of this piece, and as such they have been left on the table so that other scholars may feast.

**Historiography**

The performance of masculine identities in dancehall music can be attributed in large part to Jamaica’s status as a colony until very recently. It existed and continues to exist in a liminal space, and the evolution of the dominant culture there reflects this. From 1655 to 1962, Jamaica was under colonial rule from Great Britain. Given a span of 300 years, Great Britain had varying

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5 Songs exist to be heard. Lyrical analysis is useful, but incomplete in its ability to convey meaning. In order to provide this much-needed experiential context and to take advantage of the digital format of this paper, all block quotes of song lyrics are hyperlinked to YouTube. Clicking on the text will open a new window with the song audio (and in some cases, a music video).
degrees of direct involvement over time, but they still kept a tight hold on the economy and large-scale governance of the colony and imposed their own white-male-centric power systems. As such, the development of unique cultural identities and ways of life in Jamaica are directly influenced by the long and torturous history of the enslavement of the Afro-Jamaicans who make up the vast majority of the island’s population.

Afro-Jamaicans were the ones exploited in the colonial relationship, so their trauma and subsequent responses to that trauma act as some of the clearest indicators as to how cultural identities and conflicts took shape. Donna P. Hope suggests, in her 2010 book *Man Vibes: Masculinity in the Jamaican Dancehall*, that the two major factors that inform the foundation of hegemonic masculinity and patriarchy in Jamaica are the institutions of plantation slavery and indentureship.6 Hope notes that among these two similar institutions, there were similar points of control that white enslavers “employed… in their quest for masculine supremacy which deprived Black men of domestic authority either as husbands or as fathers – the denial of Black men to the right of patriarchal status, and the sexual control and appropriation of Black women.”7 When it came time for the Afro-Jamaican majority to free themselves from the colonial metropole and form their own government, they focused on making theirs in the image of richer, more politically-stable nations such as the United Kingdom, and devoted their attention to the articulation of nationalism, self-determination, and the cultural and political empowerment of Afro-Jamaicans,8 rather than to the dismantling of the patriarchy that lurked under the surface, unspoken but silently benefitting the new ruling class just as it had for the old.

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White, British patriarchy is not the only factor to have informed Jamaica’s senses of masculinity. The propping-up of cis-het men in positions of power has taken place over the entire history of the island and left indelible marks on how Afro-Jamaicans formed their own government, but so too have systematic racism and classism. Maurice Hall, in his article *Negotiating Jamaican Masculinities*, outlines a six-point script for how Black male bodies are defined -- consciously or unconsciously -- in the collective imagination of nations touched by colonialism, on either side of the power dynamic. Hall argues that in the minds of colonial powers, “the Black masculine body is scripted as: 1) exotic and strange, 2) violent, 3) incompetent and uneducated, 4) sexual, 5) exploitable, and 6) innately incapacitated.”

He continues by noting that the script is not a dead phenomenon and that “…there are still enduring Western caricatures of the Caribbean male as breezily self-assertive, yet devoid of substance, exotic, and anti-intellectual.” Describing Caribbean men with these qualities provides convenient excuses for justifying racism and the perpetuation of the colonial project. While earlier Social Darwinists gave the explanation that the geographic environment led to deficiencies of character among colonized peoples, environmental determinism soon gave way to race-, class-, and education-based determinism without ever changing the stereotypes. Colonists were the ones with means and schooling before, but that power had transferred to a small group of upper- and middle-class Afro-Jamaicans under the false pretense of meritocracy, which only served to keep the ruling class in their ivory towers. This played into the idea that Black men -- especially those in currently- or formerly-colonized settings such as Jamaica -- live and work within a dichotomy of either acting out those stereotypes or somehow trying too hard to be like

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10 Hall, “Negotiating Jamaican Masculinities,” 35.
the masters. Whether poor Afro-Jamaicans tried to climb up the social ladder or they did not, the ruling class scoffed at them for the way they acted.

A similar framework can be found within Hope’s analysis of the nature of hegemonic power. The author outlines the ways that hegemony comes to be accepted, although her example specifically references systems of inequality between genders and not races:

Hegemony, however natural in appearance, is arrived at via the social processes of competition, domination, subordination and resistance. From within this struggle hegemonic masculinity emerges as the configuration of gender practice which surreptitiously legitimates patriarchy and guarantees a dominant position for particular groups of men alongside the subordination of women and other groups of men.¹¹

This quote was meant to direct attention to the idea of compulsory heterosexuality among Jamaican men, which is the practice of privileging cisgender and heterosexual identities and the hegemonic performances that come with those identities. This creates a culture where anyone who does not meet those standards is unable to take part in the discourse, which places cis-het Afro-Jamaican men in the position of power over other, non-cis-het, Afro-Jamaican men. It is by this very same process that white, British, slave-owning men established the six point script, as outlined by Hall, and twisted the structures of power to benefit themselves over Afro-Jamaican men. These processes, rooted in colonialism and patriarchy, have remained pervasive within the contemporary dancehall music scene as evidenced by the performances of masculinity exhibited by those who create and consume the music.

**The Rudeboy: Who Is He?**

One of the most well-known depictions of men in the dancehall is that of the Rudeboy: a subsection of lower-class, Afro-Jamaican young men whose use of dialect and violence as well

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as close-quarters urban living originally set them apart from other young men of their age and social class. Maurice Hall explains that these traits, which could ostensibly limit the opportunities of those who exhibit them, were cultivated intentionally in order to “bypass the delicacies associated with Standard English expression and speak directly to the raw experience and emotion associated with living a life of disenfranchisement….“

Hall goes on to quote Grant Farred, who notes that the Rudeboy phenomenon took on a life of its own, eclipsing the original intentions of its first participants and becoming a staple of Jamaican culture writ large. Farred says (through Hall), “Jamaican male identity, in response to the harsh conditions afflicting the largely Black, urban underclass, developed a swaggering, menacing presence that characterizes Black underclass masculinity in Jamaica up to the current times.”

Rudeboys originally sought to use body language, posturing, and dialect to intentionally distance themselves from a colonial metropole that tore power away from the locals by controlling the island’s economy and then completely abandoning it. For example, rather than speaking in British English, as colonists deemed proper, Rudeboys would inject Patois into their speech or intentionally alter the rules of spoken English (such as saying “me” instead of “I” to address themselves). By dismissing fundamental British values -- like speaking their language -- as unimportant or irrelevant to their own identities, Afro-Jamaican men asserted their ability to forge their own paths by their own rules, a freedom that was not afforded to them for hundreds of years prior.

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14 Ini Kamoze, “Here Comes the Hotstepper,” by Ini Kamoze, Chris Kenner, Kenton Nix, and Salaam Remi, track 3 on Here Comes the Hotstepper, Columbia, 1995, CD.
As Rudeboys are a relatively new brand of counterculture and scholarship on other groups such as American hippies and beatniks was already part of the scholarly canon, students of post-colonial-Jamaican history are blessed with an abundance of literature, even from the earliest days of independence. G. White’s 1967 article, “Rudie, Oh Rudie!” looks at the development of Rudeboy identity through the lens of a burgeoning subcultural group. This article is informed by a newly-liberated Jamaica that is finally beginning to develop cultural norms on its own terms, free of colonial influence, but is already reeling from the economic fallout ensuing from the withdrawal of British assets. As such, White seeks to explain how this group of young people handled themselves in the context of full cultural freedom but limited economic power. He says that “Rudie culture has so developed as to command adherents among the majority of urban lower class youth. Common experience and a consciousness of a common ethnic origin influenced this development considerably.”

“Common experience” here refers to the results of poverty and lack of social mobility experienced by Afro-Jamaican communities, both in urban centers and the rural periphery of the country. Governmental attempts to recognize this lack of access have not been conducted through a centralized agency or department, so very little has been done on a national level to rally Jamaican citizens around the flag and even less has been done to offset outsiders’ perception of Jamaica as an underdeveloped nation. Brand Jamaica, an independent 2019 project at the intersection of scholarship and marketing, further illustrates these endemic, structural challenges that Jamaica continues to face that result in such widespread poverty, 52 years after White’s article was published:

16 White, “Rudie, Oh Rudie!”, 40-41.
Government policy and leadership with respect to economic growth, infrastructure development, employment, national security, and education are fundamental aspects of what defines and determines a country’s brand. The everyday lived experience of the Jamaican people and the effects of these challenges on the country’s public image are thus fundamental to ongoing and future efforts to brand Jamaica.\footnote{Hume Johnson and Kamilla Gentles-Peart, \textit{Brand Jamaica: Reimagining a National Image and Identity}, University of Nebraska Press (2019), 8-9.}

\textit{Brand Jamaica} is an extra-governmental project designed to help Jamaica remodel its national identity and international image and appear more attractive to investors and native folks alike. But as the quote points out, Jamaicans struggle to access some of the most crucial aspects of daily life: infrastructure, employment, and education. This explanation of “common experience” in the context of low social capital seems relatively consistent with Hall’s explanation of the roots of Rudeboy culture as discussed above.

“Common experience” as an expression of economic unity is a decent-but-incomplete foundation; class is certainly important in influencing lifestyle, but the effect that intersections of gender, ethnicity, and class have on the process of socializing and acculturating young men compound those influences. Afro-Jamaican boys born around the same time period very well may have been socialized via many of the same processes and values. These processes and values contribute further to the “common experience,” but even still, they do not expose the full range of circumstances that affect how this cohort of men would grow up and interact with other men or with women in their communities. White attempts to tie up this loose end by referencing the “consciousness of a common ethnic origin,” positing that Blackness is a unifying factor among these communities. This is an interesting point of articulation, as it adds ideas about the communal nature of socializing young men into the discourse surrounding the process of moving past the legacies of colonialism. This notion of taking a village to raise a child is corroborated by
Hall’s argument that socialization in poorer and urban areas takes place largely in the street or the “yard” due to forced communal living.  

What Hall alludes to that White does not, however, is the idea that there is always an audience in this process. By having much more direct community involvement in teaching a young man cultural values -- not out of choice, but out of proximity -- there are more eyes watching these young men. This pushes them to perform their identities in ways that are expected and hegemonic, and makes certain that there will be community members close by to punish any perceived transgressions. White’s original comment does not take into account the audience, and neglects to point out that performances of gender and sexuality are factors important enough that they could tear a rift in a community of common experience or origin. While a “common ethnic origin” of Afro-Jamaican identity certainly helps to foster some level of understanding between groups of different classes, it is vital to remember that hegemonic masculinity still exists within and between these communities, and that the “processes of competition, domination, subordination and resistance” still take place, often in violent ways.

**The Rudeboy: Where Is He?**

Now that the Rudeboy exists in the Jamaican cultural canon, where can he be found? He is everywhere, showing up as the performer and the lyrical subject alike! Dancehall performers from the 1980s and 1990s -- such as Shabba Ranks, Ini Kamozé, and Damian Marley -- all performed their music, and their public personas, in ways that align with Rudeboy identifiers, but they were hardly trailblazers on those fronts. In pre-dancehall mass-media coming out of

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19 Hall, “Negotiating Jamaican Masculinities,” 40.
Jamaica, these same ideals were presented as avenues worthy of note. Take for instance the lyrics to a 1972 song by The Slickers, “Johnny Too Bad”:

Walking down the road with the pistol in your waist,/ Johnny you’re too bad (woah wo-woah)./
Walking down the road, with the ratchet in your waist,/ Johnny you’re too bad (woah wo-woah).\(^{21}\)

Before we learn Johnny’s name, we learn that he carries a gun. The very next thing we hear about him is that he also carries a ratchet (knife). His personality traits, line of work, education, family, and aspirations are all irrelevant. What matters is that he’s always packing, and -- whether The Slickers are celebrating or condemning him for doing so -- that, in and of itself, is worthy of being immortalized in song. It is hardly ever as simple as that, though; in post-colonial Jamaica, the expectation placed on young Black men by their peers was to take charge of their own futures, despite not having control of the economic or political power structures necessary to do so. Rather than caving back into colonial rule, they armed themselves. As such, this song can be interpreted as a recognition of Johnny’s participation in the youth movement for independence. Walking down the road with the pistol in his waist, Johnny makes use of props to signal that he has power and autonomy despite the racist, classist structures that govern his life saying much the opposite.

This song, more than others, is important due to the fact that it was featured in the 1972 movie “The Harder They Come,” which not only made a major splash in Jamaican pop culture, but had minor crossover appeal in North American and European markets. In the context of the film, “Johnny Too Bad” is used not just to set the mood, but to act as a reflection of the main

\(^{21}\) The Slickers, “Johnny Too Bad,” by Winston Bailey, Roy Beckford, Derrick Crooks, and Trevor "Batman" Wilson, track 7 on The Harder They Come, Mango Records, 1972, LP.
character, Ivan Martin. Ivan earns his money by making music and selling ganja, and he also kills some police officers along the way. The parallel between Ivan and Johnny is fully intentional, and it was designed to drive home the point that Ivan is a flawed but poignant depiction of Jamaican men in the beginning of its post-colonial period.

The international success of “The Harder They Come” and its accompanying soundtrack album cemented a version of this character archetype as endemically Jamaican in the minds of white, non-Jamaican viewers, especially those from nations with a history of colonialism, such as the US and the UK. Through the eyes of a colonial metropole, Ivan in the movie and Johnny in the song appear merely to be easily-exploitable, violent, and simple men, reinforcing Hall’s six-point script for oppressing Black male bodies.\(^{22}\) Characters like these two seem to allow themselves to get conned into bad deals, to sell illegal drugs, and to carry weapons in order to kill police. However, this again plays into the distinction between intention and perception with regard to performing identities: while these actions are all seen as improper by colonizers -- who run the music labels, make the drug laws, and police the island -- they are meant to be displays of autonomy, resilience, and justice designed to resonate with a young, newly-liberated Jamaican audience. And it must have worked, as 40,000 people showed up to see “The Harder They Come” premiere at a 1,500-seat theatre.\(^{23}\) “The Harder They Come” spoke to its audience through realism, by depicting a man just like them taking matters into his own hands on the silver screen and providing a complicated role model upon whom they could base their own success and justify their own methods for achieving their goals.

\(^{22}\) Hall, “Negotiating Jamaican Masculinities,” 35.
\(^{23}\) Dennis McClellan, “Perry Henzell, 70; His Movie ‘The Harder They Come’ Brought Reggae to the World,” in \textit{The Los Angeles Times}, 2 December, 2006.
The Lyrical & Symbolic Significance of Guns

Where is the dancehall performer, physically, and why does this have any bearing on his music or the performance of his gender? He is certainly not living in a fancy resort like white tourists do when they come to Jamaica. No; he likely lives in the inner-city. Damian Marley wrote about this disparity in his 2005 song “Welcome to Jamrock,” which forces listeners to confront the realities of inner-city Trenchtown and to consider the circumstances that allowed it to end up in such a state.

Di thugs dem will do whe dem got to/
And won't think twice to shot you/
Don't make dem spot you, unless you carry guns a lot too/
A bare tuff ting come at you.24

Here, Marley paints a picture in which men commit acts of violence only out of necessity. Friend or foe, gay or straight, man or woman, armed or unarmed, these men feel the need to prove that they are capable of running their own lives. It is unwise for anyone, outsider or community member alike, to disrupt the usual flow of activity or to question men with guns because they will “do whe dem got to.” These men are not out for blood, they simply feel the need to provide for their community using whatever means they can access. In the ghetto, they are more likely to own guns than the means of production, and if that leads to a man choosing between his own life and the lives of his loved ones or the life of anyone else -- an outsider who poses a threat -- he “won’t think twice to shot you.” Donna P. Hope notes that this is part of a trend dating back well before the song’s 2005 release, stating that “contemporary images of gun violence in dancehall music culture are related to life in the inner cities… which include urban poverty; political

24 Damian Marley, “Welcome to Jamrock,” by Damian Marley, track 3 on Welcome to Jamrock, Universal/Tuff Gong, 2005, CD
tribalism; narco-culture and the culture of the gun.” 25 Gun use exists as a rather paradoxical cultural monolith in dancehall, at once an epidemic ravaging the inner-cities and the only way to protect oneself from that very same threat.

Gun violence in “Jamrock” is not only presented as a reaction to the unsafe conditions of Trenchtown’s ghettos, but also a proactive measure that reinforces a type of patriarchal hegemony; men may carry weapons in order to prove their strength and assert themselves as the protectors and providers of their families or their neighborhoods, which perpetuates traditional gender roles. Carolyn Cooper’s “‘Lyrical Gun’” confirms and parallels the ideas found in “Jamrock” through a dissection of the non-literal/non-lethal uses of the gun in dancehall music. One motif she explores is “Shabba [Ranks]’s metaphor of the gun as a symbolic penis.” 26 positing that the act of carrying, waving around, and being proud of the gun is an extension of cisgender, heterosexual, and patriarchal normativity within peer-enforced social power structures. There is a direct conflation of power with the ability to control life; men with penises are responsible for creating life and controlling life through example, and men who carry guns are responsible for controlling life through action and for ending life. Marley’s “Jamrock” confirms the ubiquity of this attitude with the line “Funny man ah, get dropped like a bad habit,” 27 which speaks to the harsh and unjust norm that men who are not cis-het will “get dropped” (be killed) without hesitation. This reflects the belief that men whose example is deemed unfit to be followed -- in this case due to their gender identity or expressions of sexuality -- pose an existential threat to the social order, and as such must be removed from it by force. Therefore,

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27 Damian Marley, “Welcome to Jamrock.”
men with both penises and guns, the two symbols of ultimate power, must be the ones to enforce that policy. How do they know who does not belong, though? Men who have different relationships with the penis than cis-het men leap to mind. Gay and trans men perform their masculinities in different ways than cis-het men, and as such represent a threat to the hegemony. This is unfortunately backed up by crime data, as one 2018 study notes that LGBT+ Jamaicans are upwards of three times more likely to be involved in a violent death than cis-het Jamaicans. This statistic is the reflection of an abject horror in Jamaican society, and would understandably lead to lower rates of being “visibly” out as not cis-het. While some may still be open about their sexuality in light of this, others may be targeted based only on -- as Hope puts it -- “how closely [their] masculine performance matches with or moves away from the hegemonic ideals of heterosexual masculinity.”

Despite the information and interpretations above, carrying a gun is often a reactionary decision rather than a proactive one. Keeping a weapon handy can act as a means of deterrence rather than lethal intent, as even those with no interest in actually using it could still keep it on them as a way of signaling their independence and strength. Cooper agrees with this interpretation, as shown in her explanation of Ivan’s process of buying guns in “The Harder They Come.” The author states that “the guns are acquired to redefine his sense of identity and protect him from his newly-discovered vulnerability.” Whether or not Ivan wanted to use the guns, having such powerful tools on his hip gave him the ability to project a level of confidence that no

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30 Cooper, “‘Lyrical Gun’,,” 433.
one else dared to question -- a feeling carried consistently from this example in 1972 all the way through Marley’s music in 2005. A Trenchtown man’s decision to carry a gun may not signal intent to kill, but not carrying one is a clear signal of vulnerability, an inherently un-masculine trait.

Agostinho Pinnock comments on the idea of the gun as a symbolic tool as well, in his article “‘A Ghetto Education Is Basic’: (Jamaican) Dancehall Masculinities As Counter-Culture.” Pinnock emphasizes the important role that gun violence played in the socialization of these young men, explaining that guns have become not just a tool of protection or autonomy, but also a cultural touchstone. According to the author, “gun lyrics and the sounds of bullets… are reconstructed as a vital part of the identity of those who celebrate the struggles of the ‘ghetto yute’/thug mired down in political and other forms of warfare in Kingston's ghettoes.”

Here, Pinnock asserts that the development and perpetuation of the “ghetto yute”/Rudeboy identity is founded upon the idea that inner-city struggles and gun violence are concrete examples of the disenfranchisement that young, poor Jamaican men face on a top-down level (and have faced since even before White wrote about it in 1967). The sound of bullets, in other words, is the sound of an armed populace ready to stand up to injustice on their own terms -- an image consistent with that of Ivan in “The Harder They Come.” Pinnock makes it clear that these factors are inextricable from the core values of Rudeboy and general inner-city identity, so guns end up a ubiquitous part of the lifestyle and carry from the street to the studio.

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Chauvinist Performances

In the 1980s and 1990s, dancehall musicians performed their music and public persona in manners that played into the archetypal hypermasculine stereotypes previously discussed. They would flaunt their musical talent, wealth, sexual prowess, and proclivities for violence. Ini Kamoze’s 1993 hit, “Here Comes the Hotstepper”, makes use of all four of these tropes within the span of 40 seconds from the start of its second verse through the repetition of the chorus immediately following.

Extra-ordinary, juice like a strawberry/
Money to burn, baby, all of the time/
Cut to fit is me, fit to cut is she/
Come juggle with me, I say every time.

Here comes the hotstepper (murderer)/
I'm the lyrical gangster (murderer)/
Dial emergency number (murderer)/
Still love you like that (murderer).

Kamoze makes note of his status and influence (“extra-ordinary, juice like a strawberry”), but specifically does so in a way that doubles as a sexually-suggestive turn of phrase, thus reinforcing his claim that he is indeed “extra-ordinary.” This is further bolstered by the song’s music video, which syncs up with the lyrics during the verse and adds a visual layer to the performance. During the line “money to burn, baby, all of the time,” a video clip plays where hundred-dollar bills literally burn on a laundry line, which illustrates the idea that Kamoze could have done anything with his money, but he actively chose to burn it to prove he would not lose anything significant by doing so. The chorus mimics the same behavior as the verse, as Kamoze introduces himself as “the Hotstepper,” which is answered by a shout-back of

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32 Ini Kamoze, “Here Comes the Hotstepper.”
33 Ini Kamoze, “Here Comes the Hotstepper,” 1:08-1:11.
“murderer,” reinforcing the idea that this is a title to be respected, if not feared. He then makes it known why exactly he is worthy of these titles -- he is “the lyrical gangster:” an emblem of self-made success through making music, and exactly the type of gun-wielding character that Carolyn Cooper talks about in “‘Lyrical Gun’.”

The dichotomy of “Dial emergency number” versus “Still love you like that,” is another instance of conflating the gun with the penis, as violence is paired overtly with sexual desire and implicitly with sexual dominance. Kamoze attempts to assert his authority in one of two ways: either the threat of bodily harm or the promise of sexual satisfaction. He does so threateningly, though, as even declarations of love are punctuated by calls of “murderer.” The point that Kamoze is ultimately trying to convey is that he holds power in a multitude of ways, and even if another person could argue that one facet of his power (sex, wealth, talent, or a physical threat) is not worthy of their attention and try to pose a challenge to his dominance, he would still have other ways to establish his presence as the alpha male. Not only does he claim that he can sing circles around his competition, not only does he have more money, not only does he have more sex, but as a failsafe he also advertises himself as a murderer. While these claims may seem to be on par with the bragging of any other hit song from the 1990s, it is important to note that “Hotstepper” was met with massive international success, peaking at #14 on the Billboard Hot 100 in 199434 and earned Ini Kamoze a slew of fans from the American hip-hop demographic. He proved that he had the money and the critical acclaim to be taken seriously, making his other claims regarding his sexual prowess and readiness to kill seem more serious. Additionally, he led by example in showing that disrupting the “prescribed routes to [social class] mobility” such as

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white-collar work and education was a valid strategy -- oddly enough taking down one form of class-based hegemonic masculinity by touting another.

Shabba Ranks’s “Ting-a-Ling” makes use of many of the same motifs, most notably his willingness to shoot anyone who poses a threat to his personal wealth. He opens the first verse with an indictment of the record executives who seek to use his popularity for their own gain rather than helping him advance his career:

Booyaka! Booyaka! call for Shabba Rankin/
Shabba Ranks disappear and tear another man chin (true!)/
Dem a di don, to di biz we have di key/
Put di don to di key and turn him inna donkey - yes!36

“Booyaka! Booyaka!” is an onomatopoeic representation of gunshots firing -- confirming the ubiquity of bullet sounds in Dancehall as referenced by Pinnock -- and Shabba has no qualms about ensuring that the sound is heard. “Dem a di don, to di biz we have di key/ Put di don to di key and turn him inna donkey” speaks to the precarious nature of the corporate-artistic relationship. Artists are beholden to the record executives who sign their paychecks (“Dem a di don”) and as such must compromise their creative visions, sound, and public personae to match expectations -- but at the same time, these artists are simultaneously the ones who make these executives rich in the first place (“to di biz we have di key”) and hold the power to make an ass of these powerful men (quite literally, “turn him inna donkey”) in the public eye. Compare the sentiments to the aforementioned “Welcome to Jamrock” by Damian Marley; it seems unlikely that Shabba is the type of “thug” to “do whe [him] got to”37, as by the time “Ting-a-Ling” released in 1992, Shabba Ranks was already a well-known performer with enough money to his

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37 Damian Marley, “Welcome to Jamrock.”
name that he was concerned about record executives exploiting his lucrative output. Much like his contemporary, Ini Kamoke, Shabba’s wealth and name-brand recognition granted legitimacy to his actions and performances, cementing him comfortably in the hegemonic class.

Discussions of hegemonic masculinity in this paper have focused on male-male interactions so far, but Donna P. Hope’s initial definition specifically mentions that the subjugation of women is something that must be considered as well. As such, an examination of Shabba Ranks’ 1987 song “Love Punany Bad” is in order, as it focuses exclusively on the aspect of sex as power. Punany -- Jamaican slang for vagina -- is the main topic of the song, but the ways in which Shabba expresses his “love” for it are… unusual:

You get inna punany that can swallow a hog,
Stand up and work different, no gwan like a coward.
Put her foot upon your shoulder, with punany hoist like a flag.
Skin it out wide and kill it with stab.
Punany, come here to wash by soap and rag,
If you no wash the punany good, it stinker than dead hog.

This verse, much like the rest of the song, shows a flagrant disregard for the well-being, dignity, and basic humanity of women. Shabba hyperbolizes the anatomical capabilities of punany to say it “can swallow a hog” -- but to what effect? It seems that he is equating the size of his penis and his power over the woman with whom he is having sex. While this is not directly confirmed by the lyrics, Shabba’s references to his penis are frequent enough and have enough impact that Carolyn Cooper makes note of “Shabba’s metaphor of the gun as a symbolic penis” as previously discussed. But is he comparing it to the size of a full-grown pig, or is he saying that the type of punany that can “swallow a hog” is not a desirable thing? The latter is more likely, as

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40 Due to compulsory heterosexuality, women are implied to be the only ones with punany.
41 Cooper, “‘Lyrical Gun’,” 438.
the last line of the verse returns to other qualities of punany which Shabba does not find desirable, and he again compares it to qualities of a hog. He continues on to say that men who do not have sex -- heterosexual sex, of course -- are “coward[s],” yet again implying that his power comes from his sexual prowess. More specifically, this shows that he, as a cis-het man, is able to exercise his privilege in a way that makes him feel as though he is within his rights to do whatever he wants with a woman’s body. This is further shown through Shabba’s continued objectification and dehumanization of women throughout the verse and the song. He never refers to “women” specifically, and only says girls (or “gyals”) twice. Furthermore, the overwhelming number of allusions to women are made in reference to punany, which is then portrayed as something that needs to be “hoist[ed] like a flag” or “kill[ed]... with [a] stab.” This is either a direct call by Shabba for violence toward women, or makes light of it. Either case is a blatant violation of trust and an exorbitantly toxic performance of hegemonic masculinity, a system that needed no assistance in being terrible for the welfare of marginalized communities.

Shabba’s performance in this song is the clearest example yet of sex being a tool of oppression. Donna P. Hope’s assertion that colonial masters “deprived Black men of domestic authority either as husbands or as fathers [and denied] Black men to the right of patriarchal status [through] the sexual control and appropriation of Black women”⁴² has already factored into discussions of Jamaican masculinity, but Shabba flips that idea on its head in a case of overcompensation. This song reflects the idea that the “sexual control and appropriation of Black women” in Jamaica was a direct slight against men’s autonomy by taking away their right to private ownership rather than as a separate violation of these women’s autonomy through sexual

⁴² Hope, Man Vibes, 5.
subjugation. Women -- or at the very least punany, as Shabba makes abundantly clear -- are thus implied to be property of the men rather than their equals in humanity and independence. Sex, then, becomes the act of a man claiming a woman as his own and asserting his birthright to dominance and the ability to enforce life. Given the idea of the gun and the penis being the two objects of absolute power in post-colonial Jamaican hegemonic masculinity, the act of sex and making life having the same symbolic weight as the act of firing a gun and taking life makes sense.

**Conclusions**

Shabba Ranks made his position on women’s place in Jamaican society known in 1987 when he released “Love Punany Bad,” but by the time he was interviewed by Rafika Soaries in 1995, he had walked the chauvinism back quite a bit. When asked about the meaning of his new song “Original Woman,” Shabba replied:

> ‘Original Woman’ is the Black queen, who should be treated that way. I've never heard of a king disrespecting his queen. I've seen my father loving my mother and treating her like she is special. I hear girls complaining about being battered and bruised. If you respect a woman, you respect yourself; if you hate a woman, you hate yourself. Woman is the mother of civilization and it is stated to honor your mother.43

The difference between “Skin [punany] out wide and kill it with stab”44 and “I’ve never heard of a king disrespecting his queen” is diametric. Such a shift in tone is wonderful, assuming that the premise of equal respect for people of all genders is in fact a good thing.45 But ultimately, there is no definitive way of knowing if Shabba had had a change of heart in the time between releasing “Love Punany Bad” and giving this interview. Maybe his opinion on women had really changed

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44 Shabba Ranks, “Love Punany Bad.”
45 To clarify: the author does in fact believe that equal respect for people of all genders is a good thing.
in those eight years. Maybe this was always his opinion and “Punany” was intended as a joke track meant to satirize the men who do actually feel that way. Maybe he had not changed his mind and still saw women as sex objects, but had changed his advertising tactics to seem more likeable. The lattermost of these is the most interesting, as it reflects the nature of performative masculinity in Jamaica; regardless of Shabba’s true feelings, he released “Punany” in 1987 because it was a surefire way to gain notoriety in his local scene and then gave this interview in 1995 because he was a prominent public figure with an international fanbase. In other words, his personal identity and feelings were rendered irrelevant due to the effect of his performance.

Shabba’s shift in attitude reflects an important truth about hegemony, especially as it relates to performance: power is in constant flux. What is acceptable within one social context or governmental regime may be thrown out the window when an actor sets foot upon a new stage. In order to maintain power, Shabba had to acknowledge a shifting social landscape and adapt his performance accordingly. To again reference Michel Foucault’s History of Sexuality, power in this case is not absolute rule of law, nor is it a formal strike of the name from a handwritten list of the in-group. Rather, it is “the multiplicity of force relations immanent in the sphere in which they operate, and which constitute their own organization.” Whether or not Shabba actually changed his own mind, he saw the writing on the wall and made the conscious effort to alter the language he used in order to maintain his power. This was not a predetermined step in his celebrity process, but an organic development of his practices to reflect the attitudes present in his spheres of influence. Ultimately, though, whether his attitude changed or not is largely

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46 Michel Foucault, The History of Sexuality, Pantheon Books (1978), 92.
irrelevant to the effect that this interview had on his image; he acted differently, so he was perceived differently, and -- importantly -- he came to this decision on his own.

Each of the songs spoken about in this paper make it clear that self-determination is an inherently-masculine ideal in post-Colonial Jamaica, and that the artists who made them each feel the need to be treated with respect and dignity in order to act “like a man” in the way that is expected of them. The actions of one individual, though, are not inherently countercultural nor are they inherently hegemonic. Making money, having sex, being a talented musician, and carrying a gun do not automatically make a man an agent of change nor the enforcer of an oppressive regime, at least not within the context of post-colonial Jamaica. These actions need to be examined within the context of the systems in which individuals live, work, and interact with their peers.

Systems of privilege and power are dynamic. As power changes hands over time, the practices of the elite become privileged and their importance is reified through emulation. In this case, power was shifted from rich, white, British slave-owners to rich, Black and Brown Afro-Jamaicans. Performances of identity that were once enacted by these Afro-Jamaicans as a means of expressing their frustration with the disenfranchisement they faced, became the very performances that signaled power and the ability to disenfranchise others. By this token, attempting to label behaviors or performances as countercultural or hegemonic does not work in a vacuum. Individual actors and their individual behaviors must be analyzed with thought given to the contexts in which they appear.

In the 1960s and 1970s, young men carrying guns on the streets of Kingston were seen as bravely showing their defiance -- as if to tell British colonizers that they were no longer needed
in determining how to run Jamaica. Given a couple decades to let the dust settle, this very same cultural practice changed in meaning and became a way for some men to exert their will over others -- as if to tell marginalized Jamaicans that they were no longer welcome in determining how to run Jamaica. This is not due to the actions of any one individual, but the indication of a shift in power dynamic. By the time the 1980s and 1990s rolled around, Afro-Jamaican gun-wielders went from being the oppressed group to being the privileged group within the inner-city. Thus, without ever changing their practices, the actions taken by these men shifted in meaning from resistance to regulation. Having never given it a thought, these men and the performances of identity that they enacted went from being countercultural to hegemonic.
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This paper was written in full accordance with the Muhlenberg College Academic Integrity Code.