

Wilfrid Laurier University

Scholars Commons @ Laurier

---

Theses and Dissertations (Comprehensive)

---

2011

## You Can't Go To Zion with a Carnal Mind: Slackness and Culture in the Music of Yellowman

Brent Hagerman  
*Wilfrid Laurier University*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholars.wlu.ca/etd>



Part of the [Music Commons](#), and the [Sociology of Culture Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Hagerman, Brent, "You Can't Go To Zion with a Carnal Mind: Slackness and Culture in the Music of Yellowman" (2011). *Theses and Dissertations (Comprehensive)*. 1110.  
<https://scholars.wlu.ca/etd/1110>

This Dissertation is brought to you for free and open access by Scholars Commons @ Laurier. It has been accepted for inclusion in Theses and Dissertations (Comprehensive) by an authorized administrator of Scholars Commons @ Laurier. For more information, please contact [scholarscommons@wlu.ca](mailto:scholarscommons@wlu.ca).



Library and Archives  
Canada

Published Heritage  
Branch

395 Wellington Street  
Ottawa ON K1A 0N4  
Canada

Bibliothèque et  
Archives Canada

Direction du  
Patrimoine de l'édition

395, rue Wellington  
Ottawa ON K1A 0N4  
Canada

*Your file* *Votre référence*  
*ISBN* 978-0-494-75398-9  
*Our file* *Notre référence*  
*ISBN* 978-0-494-75398-9

## NOTICE

The author has granted a non-exclusive license allowing Library and Archives Canada to reproduce, publish, archive, preserve, conserve, communicate to the public by telecommunication or on the Internet, loan, distribute and sell theses worldwide, for commercial or non-commercial purposes, in microform, paper, electronic and/or any other formats

The author retains copyright ownership and moral rights in this thesis. Neither the thesis nor substantial extracts from it may be printed or otherwise reproduced without the author's permission.

---

In compliance with the Canadian Privacy Act some supporting forms may have been removed from this thesis.

While these forms may be included in the document page count, their removal does not represent any loss of content from the thesis.

## AVIS

L'auteur a accordé une licence non exclusive permettant à la Bibliothèque et Archives Canada de reproduire, publier, archiver, sauvegarder, conserver, transmettre au public par télécommunication ou par l'Internet, prêter, distribuer et vendre des thèses partout dans le monde, à des fins commerciales ou autres, sur support microforme, papier, électronique et/ou autres formats.

L'auteur conserve la propriété du droit d'auteur et des droits moraux qui protègent cette thèse. Ni la thèse ni des extraits substantiels de celle-ci ne doivent être imprimés ou autrement reproduits sans son autorisation.

---

Conformément à la loi canadienne sur la protection de la vie privée, quelques formulaires secondaires ont été enlevés de cette thèse.

Bien que ces formulaires aient inclus dans la pagination, il n'y aura aucun contenu manquant.

  
**Canada**



**You can't go to Zion with a Carnal Mind:  
Slackness and Culture in the Music of  
King Yellowman**

BY

**BRENT HAGERMAN**

BA, Wilfrid Laurier University, 1995

MA, Wilfrid Laurier University, 2000

Dissertation

Submitted to the Department of Religion and Culture  
in partial fulfilment of the requirements for  
Doctorate of Philosophy in Religious Studies  
Wilfrid Laurier University  
2011

Brent Hagerman © 2011

## Abstract

Jamaican deejay Yellowman is best known for “slackness” lyrics centred on masculine heterosexual potency, sexist objectification of women and graphic sexual narratives. Yet a deeper look at Yellowman’s life and recorded output suggests that when his slackness is read in the context of Afro-Jamaican culture, reggae history and his Rastafarian faith, a more complex interpretation of his slackness is needed. This study will draw on Carolyn Cooper’s (2001) theory that slackness is a “metaphorical revolt against law and order, an undermining of consensual standards of decency” (p. 141). Whereas the term “culture” is used in reggae to depict music that is Afrocentric, Rasta-inspired and socially conscious, and is normally seen as the antithesis of slackness, I suggest that for Yellowman, the slack/culture dichotomy is eroded when slackness becomes part of the religious repertoire of resistance against mainstream Jamaican society.

This dissertation is divided into three sections: a) an overview of theory and methodology; b) an ethnographic case study based on Yellowman’s life and career; and c) four analytical chapters that offer itineraries to theorize slackness in Yellowman’s music. First, I argue that through slackness Yellowman subverted embedded Jamaican cultural notions of sexuality, gender, race, nationality and beauty by promoting the *dundus* (black albino) as sexually appealing, hyper-masculine and part of the imagined black nation. Second, I demonstrate how Yellowman’s sexual lyrics are an example of Obika Gray’s (2004) thesis that slackness was a conscious political project employed by the Jamaican poor to contest the normative values of dominant society. I also contest the neat binary used in reggae journalism that pits Yellowman and slackness against Bob Marley and culture. Third, I argue that Yellowman employs slackness for the purpose of moral regulation based on conservative Afro-Jamaican sexual *morés* and his understanding of Rastafarian morality. Finally, I situate Yellowman’s perforating of Christian dualistic ideas of carnal/spiritual in the Rastafarian Babylon/Zion binary and show how Afro-Caribbean religion has redefined Christian dualism using an Afrocentric body-positive ideology.

## Acknowledgements

The work of writing a dissertation can be a gruelling and solipsistic affair. I have been fortunate to not only enjoy the research and writing of mine, but have had continual assistance and advice from a wide community.

Yellowman has been abundantly generous throughout this project, allowing me extensive access to his life. For that I am grateful. When I first sat down with him to ask for his involvement in this project, I wasn't sure how he would respond. I had planned on a series of interviews in Jamaica spread out over a few years and to observe him at work, both on stage and in the studio. This was a lot to ask a reggae legend that spends up to six months on the road each year. Yellowman's initial response was to tell me that a project of this scope would be very time consuming. I thought that he was excusing himself due to his schedule constraints. Quite the opposite, he was warning me about the necessary time and effort this project would require of me to do it justice and wanted to make sure I was committed. Since that day Yellowman has opened his house and his history to me as I probed the meaning of slackness and culture in his music. He introduced me to musicians and producers that granted me interviews I never could have arranged myself. Philip "Fatis" Burrell, for instance, told me that he never grants interviews. But when Yellowman explained the nature of my project and asked him to speak with me, he agreed. Others were only too happy to oblige out of their respect for the King of Dancehall. The "all access pass" Yellowman granted me enabled me to undertake valuable research into dancehall culture, and also amounted to a reggae fan's dream come true.

My supervisor, Carol B. Duncan, directly shaped the style of this dissertation when she handed me back a SSHRC (Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council) funding proposal with more red ink than black. She told me to make sure my research is readable to people outside of the field. I followed her advice and SSHRC subsequently funded this research. I have aimed to create a "readable" thesis ever since. I am greatly indebted to Dr. Duncan for four and a half years of mentoring and all that entails: ongoing feedback, professional advice, patience, motivational talks, lunches, coffee—the list goes on. Dr. Duncan has been a champion of my work from the beginning, a role model of solid scholarship and a dancehall fan who helped channel my interests in reggae, religious studies and African diasporic culture into a focused research project.

My committee members, Natasha Pravaz, Richard Walker and Sarah King, have read several drafts of this work and their comments have improved my scholarship and writing. They have challenged me to read my own work with different eyes, and their input has strengthened this thesis considerably.

My Jamaican fieldwork was aided in innumerable ways by scholars, musicians and friends. Accomplishing this dissertation without the help of Simeon Stewart, Yellowman's manager and founding member of Sagittarius band, would be nearly inconceivable. His knowledge of the Jamaican music industry and reggae history provided me a portal from which to view Yellowman's career. He opened many doors for me providing the necessary connections to make my fieldwork not only much smoother, but far more enjoyable than it would have been otherwise. In addition, he housed and fed

me and drove from Negril to Kingston in the middle of the night to make sure I caught a flight home on time I am also grateful to the rest of the Sagittarius 2008 line-up (Desmond “Desi” Gaynor, Zemroy “Zimma” Lewis, Duwayne “Shotta Yut” Holette) for sharing their stories and allowing me to get in the way of their work

Thank you to everyone who assisted my work in Jamaica Abijah, Philip “Fatis” Burrell, Charlie Chaplin, Captain Barkley, Alan “Skill” Cole, Sly Dunbar, Yumiko Gabe, Sophia Graham, Lisbeth Haddad, the Jah Love crew (Culture Dan, Pampi Judah, Rashorn, Natty Field Marshall, Damion “Dr Brains” Geohagen), Maurice “Black Scorpio” Johnson, Sister Bernadette Little of Alpha Boys School, Mellow, George Phang, Ingrid Robinson of St Michael’s Theological College, Owen “Willa” Robinson, Anthony “Red” Rose, Jah Rubel, Josey Wales, Tell’s Studio, and, of course, Ted, for driving me all over the countryside

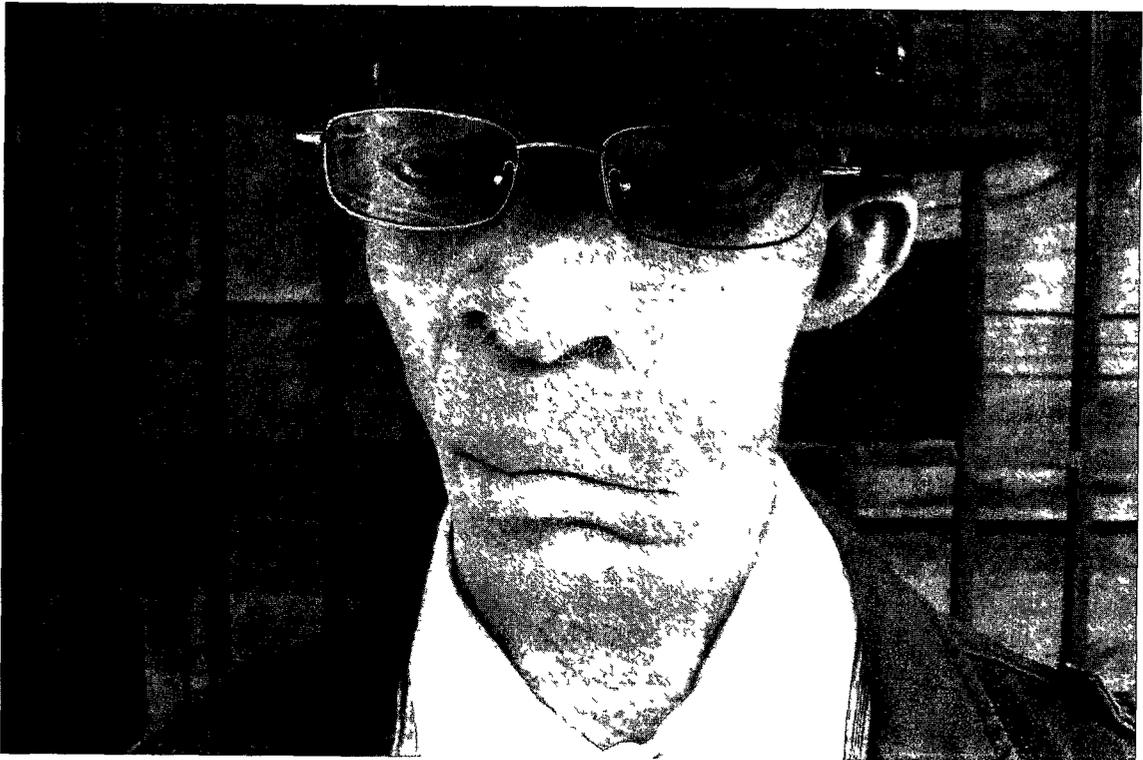
Many others offered their help during my fieldwork, and I thank them Ben Rittenhouse for his enthusiasm about the project, assistance in organizing my research trip to the United States, filming of concert and interview footage, and willingness to spend a few weeks on the road attending reggae concerts and sleeping in a Boler camping trailer, Josh Chamberlain for introducing me to the importance of soundsystem culture, filming the Jamaican interview footage, and being an excellent reggae resource, Andrew Atkinson and David Popplow for shooting the Toronto show

I am grateful for the scholars that have offered feedback, answered questions, given advice and provided forums for me to present my work Carolyn Cooper, Donna Hope, Sonjah Stanley-Niaah (and all the organizers of the International Reggae Conference at UWI) Kathryn Shields Brodber, Barbara Lalla, Pam Mordecia and Peter Patrick provided valuable insight while I was researching the art of tracing Michel Desjardins, Ron Grimes, Jenna Hennebry, Andrew Herman, Scott Kline, Kay Koppedraye, Wayne Marshall, Janet McLellen, Jason Neelis, Barry Stevenson and Chris Ross offered advice along the way

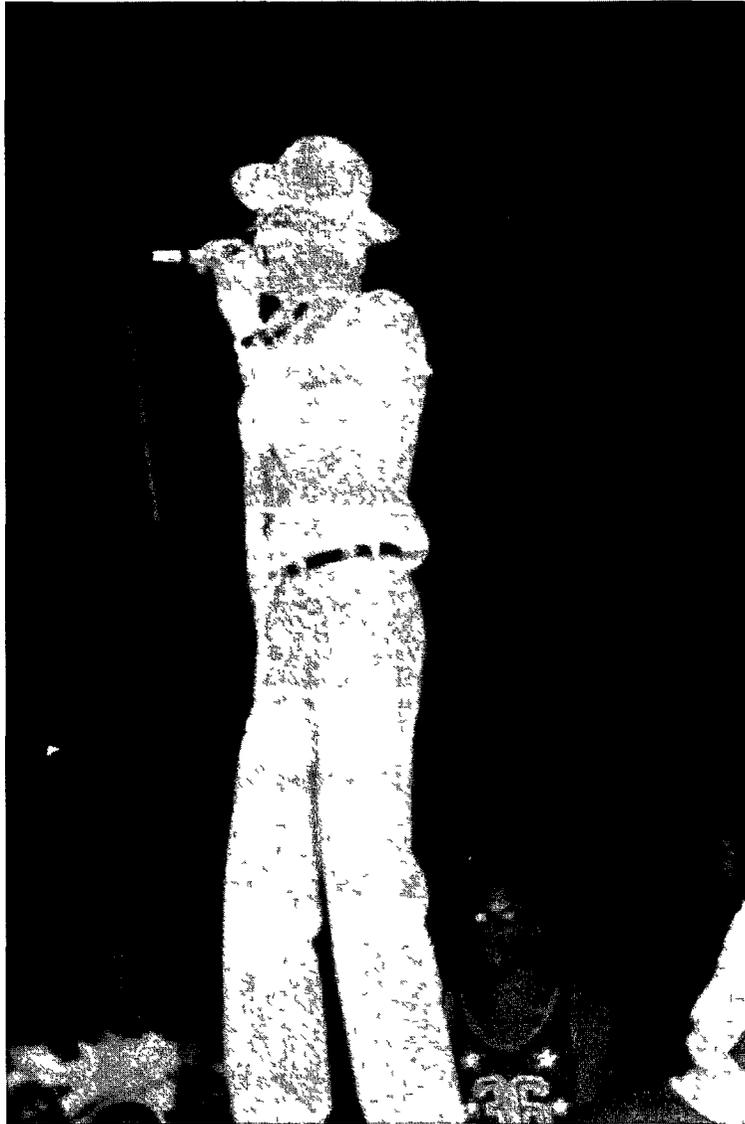
Thanks also to the reggae journalists and fans who went above and beyond expectation in providing me with interviews, archival material, contacts, advice and encouragement Chris Brito, David Cunningham, David Dacks, Nicky Dread, Ray Hurford, Joakim Kalcidis, David Katz, David Kingston, Adam Kirk, Brad Klein, Heather Lamm, Beth Lesser, Packy Malley, Terry Wilkinson (Yellowman’s #1 fan), Roger Steffens, Howard Thompson and Scott Wicken

Finally, I was only able to devote the necessary time to this project because my wife, Kate, worked harder to allow me to do it, both financially supporting us and doing more than her share with regards to raising our three girls Her sacrifice has enabled my success I can’t thank her enough

You can't go to Zion with a carnal mind  
Seh dem with dirty mind you have to leave them behind  
You can't go to Zion with your M16  
Your hands and your heart have to be pure and clean  
—Yellowman, “Natty Sat Upon the Rock”



*Yellowman, Kingston 2008  
(Photo by author)*



*Yellowman at Tastees Competition, 1979  
(Photo Heather Lamm)*

More photos, live concert video, song lyrics and a discography  
can be found at the author's website [www.zunguzung.com](http://www.zunguzung.com)

## Table of Contents

SECTION I INTRODUCTION	1
CHAPTER 1	1
Project Background	1
Slackness Versus Pure Culture An Introduction to Yellowman	5
The Sacred with the Profane	9
“Sexuality” and “Body” Terms of Reference	12
Slackness is Culture A Summary of my Argument	16
Special Issues Related to the Research	22
a Who is a Rasta?	22
b The Local Insider Versus the Global Outsider	28
Babylon System A History of Suspicion	33
Goals of the Dissertation	37
CHAPTER 2	39
Methodology	39
Inna Different Version Reggae and the Caribbean Critical Tradition	39
On Ethnography	46
a Why Ethnography?	46
b The Problem of Terminology	49
c Voice and Authority in Ethnography	50
d Multiple Audiences	53
Interview Protocol	54
Structure of the Dissertation	57
SECTION II LIFE STORY	59
CHAPTER 1	59
The Early Life of Winston “Yellowman” Foster	59
Lord, What an Ugly Baby	59
Maxfield Park, February 2008	60
Life in the Ghetto	63
Blueberry Hill	66
Me Mother Disown Me	70
The King of Kingston	72

The Rastafication of Reggae	76
Swift-Purcell, 1967	81
CHAPTER 2	84
A History of Slackness in Caribbean Music	84
Antiguan Calypso and Benna	94
Jamaican Mento	95
CHAPTER 3	106
The Teenage Years	106
Alpha Boys School for Abandoned Children	106
Sister Ignatius's Soundsystem	113
Eventide Years	116
Gunshot it Nuh Respect No One	121
CHAPTER 4	124
Breaking into the Music Business	124
Why Them a Fight I So?	124
Who Can Make the Dance Ram?	126
Only Yellowman We Want to Hear Alone	130
CHAPTER 5	141
Slackness, a New Genesis	141
Slackness A Caribbean Institution	141
The Girls Dem Pet	146
CHAPTER 6	153
The Deejay Trade	153
Every Deejay Want To Win	153
Lone Ranger	153
Yellowman Steps Up	154
Tastee Talent Contest	156
Black Scorpio	157
Superstar Yellowman	159
Aces International	161
Eventide Home Is Burning Down	166
Franklin Town	171
CHAPTER 7	173

Spiritual Awakening	173
CHAPTER 8	180
Yellowman Take Over	180
Soldier Take Over (1981)	181
Yellowman and the Media	184
Culture and Slack on the Soundsystems	187
Feeding in the Dancehall A Live Session	188
Fools Go to Church on Sunday	193
Channel One Era	195
CHAPTER 9	198
International Yellowman	198
Toronto 1982	198
Sunsplash 1982	200
Panic on the Streets of London	201
CHAPTER 10	205
Message to the World	205
A Brush with Death	205
Life Change	209
SECTION III	220
CHAPTER 1	220
Yellowman and the Modern Body Discourses of Race, Sex and Masculinity	220
Section Introduction	220
Chapter Introduction	221
The Dundus, White Negroes and Black Albinos	222
The Dundus in Jamaican Cultural History	228
Thank You Jah Jah fe Give Me This A Colour Race and Rastafari	237
Lady Saw, Shabba Ranks and Yellowman Dancehall's Sexual Politics	239
Yellowman with the Modern Body	245
Chapter Summary	253
CHAPTER 2	256
Slacker Than Them The King of Slack and Social Critique	256
Introduction	256
The Nadir of Jamaican Popular Music	258

The Moral Argument	261
Society Party	262
The Aesthetic Argument	264
Earlier Nadirs of Jamaican Popular Music	273
Two Giants Clash Marley Versus Yellowman	274
Nursery Rhymes, Animal Noises and Anti-woman Jive Talk Yellowman in the Scholarly Literature	295
Slackness Empowering the Underclasses	301
Yellowman's Critical Slackness	308
Yellowman's Afrocentric Alternative	316
Maledicta and Rudeness as Political Acts of Social Critique	318
Chapter Conclusion	321
CHAPTER 3	323
Galong, Galong, Galong Moral Regulation and the Art of Tracing	323
The Art of Tracing	325
Moral Regulation in the Dancehall	336
Come Fe Teach the Truth Yellowman as Moral Regulator	340
Trace 1 The Cunning Woman	344
Trace 2 The Irreligious Sodomite	345
Trace 3 Foreign Superpowers	357
Chapter Conclusion	361
CHAPTER 4	363
Slackness & Culture The Carnal Mind, the Jamaican Body and Rastafarian Dualism	363
Christian Dualism and Sexuality	364
The Afro-Caribbean Body	367
Forward Inna Zion, Backward Inna Babylon Rastafarian Dualism	379
Slackness/Culture A Perforated Dualism	396
Chapter Conclusion	400
CHAPTER 5	404
CONCLUSION	404
Slackness as a Tactic for Resistance	408
Areas for Further Research	409
Appendix 1 Glossary	412

<b>Appendix 2 Song Translations</b>	<b>415</b>
<b>Referenced Works</b>	<b>424</b>
<b>Interview dates with Yellowman</b>	<b>440</b>

## SECTION I: INTRODUCTION

### CHAPTER 1

#### Project Background

On July 17, 2005 I stood beside my wife, Kate, on the Jacques-Cartier Pier in Old Montreal smiling broadly and focused on the stage in front of us. Loud bass heavy reggae washed over me, provided by the Sagittarius Band at the second annual Montreal International Reggae Festival. Officially I was there as a festival correspondent for *Exclaim! Magazine*<sup>1</sup> but whether I was able to get the free press pass or not, I would have made the seven hour journey from Waterloo, Ontario to Montreal, Quebec to see the performer who was now on stage. I had not listened to Jamaican deejay<sup>2</sup> King Yellowman, an artist known for slack or lascivious lyrics, in close to a decade. Slackness, at least in reference to Yellowman, refers to lyrics centred on masculine heterosexual potency, sexist objectification of women and graphic sexual narratives. Slack is also used to refer to anything that is careless, untidy or a woman of loose morals (Cassidy 2002, 412)<sup>3</sup> I was once given a mixed tape of some of his music in high school and had spent countless hours enjoying it on my Sony Walkman in the mid-eighties. Sadly, I had loaned it to a friend during my undergraduate years and lost track of it. Suffice it to say I had never actually purchased his music nor had the opportunity to see him live, even though I would learn later that he often performed at the B A A Stadium close to the house where

---

<sup>1</sup> *Exclaim!* is a nationally distributed monthly music magazine in Canada. Together with its website, [www.exclaim.ca](http://www.exclaim.ca), it considers itself “Canada’s leading media source for new music across all genres.”

<sup>2</sup> A deejay or emcee in reggae means talk-over artist and is akin to a rapper in hip hop. A deejay’s performance is called chatting, deejaying or toasting.

<sup>3</sup> This is my own definition of slackness, other definitions will be offered later in the text.

I grew up in Hamilton, Bermuda. In fact, until I had read on the festival website that he would be headlining the Sunday night line-up in Montreal I probably could not have answered if someone asked me if he was alive or dead. But seeing his name brought back memories of my youth spent in Bermuda in the eighties, when dancehall<sup>4</sup> reggae played regularly next to roots reggae and British new wave on my tape decks and turntables.

Since I moved back to Canada in 1991 though, I had all but forgotten my love of dancehall and, somewhat stereotypically for a Canadian, only kept up with the roots side of reggae—artists such as the ubiquitous king of reggae Bob Marley, the gospel tinged Toots and the Maytals, British sensation Steel Pulse, the politically radical and musically innovative Black Uhuru and the deeply conscious Culture were my mainstays. As a musician and songwriter, the bands I played in and wrote for throughout the nineties and 2000s were heavily influenced by this style of music. These artists created a type of reggae known as roots, conscious or culture reggae. Defined by its very opposition to slack reggae, the word “culture” here refers to reggae imbued with political and religious matters, issues of social justice and black history and which very often espouses a Rastafarian and Afrocentric worldview. Prahlad says that the category of roots reggae “refers to reggae that is inspired by Rastafari ideology (as well as musical and lyrical aesthetics). This includes a conscious effort to celebrate African-influenced cultural elements” (Prahlad 2001, 5). Stolzoff, in his groundbreaking ethnography of dancehall culture in Jamaica, defines culture songs as those that “accord with Rastafarian precepts and philosophy” (Stolzoff 2000, 162). Walker describes cultural artists as those that offer

---

<sup>4</sup> Dancehall is a Jamaican popular music genre that originated in the early eighties but also refers to the culture that arose around that genre including deejay artists, dancers and soundsystems (Hope 2006)

“social commentary narrative” and “sincere preaching of praises to Jah” (Walker 2005, 245) Saunders, using the terms roots and culture music and conscious vibes, says culture

takes social, cultural, and, most important, spiritual uplift as its emphasis [I]t professes an anti-institutional sentiment in relation to the Roman Catholic Church, militarization of the nation, government policies, and the like But most important, conscious vibes artists (like Capleton, Sizzla, Tony Rebel) are closely associated with, or are believers in, Rastafarianism (Saunders 2003, 96)

Francis-Jackson provides us with a protracted definition of cultural reggae in his *Official Dancehall Dictionary* “The cultural DJ deals with *livity* and *up-fullness*—he [sic] avoids the usage of slackness lyrics and basically sees himself [sic] as part of the musical process promoting social consciousness, awareness, and change” (Francis-Jackson 1995, xiii) Francis-Jackson’s corollary that cultural reggae steers clear of slackness is taken for granted in these definitions Songs about sex are simply not considered culture or conscious reggae

The word culture, of course, has many meanings across academic disciplines but in this study it is used specifically to describe a genre of reggae and its accompanying themes There is a parallel here with “high” and “low” culture, however While these terms have traditionally delineated art that is considered refined, superior and intellectual from art that is popular and manufactured for entertainment purposes (Williams 1985, 92), Carolyn Cooper (1995) has pioneered the use of the culture/slack dichotomy as a sort of high-low cultural rubric As such it is accurate to say that culture in the reggae sense is often viewed as a more respected and superior form of reggae than its sibling, slackness Journalists and reggae historians certainly have understood these categories in this way, as did I when I allowed myself to drift away from dancehall reggae and only listen to

cultural artists

Little did I realize when Yellowman took the stage that July night in Montreal that the experience would cause me to dedicate four years of my life to intently researching dancehall culture and in the process discover a whole new generation of vibrant reggae artists that record under the banner of dancehall. As a reporter for *Exclaim!* my job that weekend was only to write a short summary of the festival, a gross injustice to such a fantastic event to be sure, but reggae music in Canada is not exactly a hot commodity and I was happy that at least I could offer it some coverage. As music journalists often do, I took the opportunity to indulge my fanship and secured an interview with Yellowman backstage after the show, knowing that *Exclaim!* would not print it, but feeling sure that I could legitimate it as general research with an eye to a future article. The research I had conducted on Yellowman before the festival left me with one impression: there was a dearth of material on one of reggae's most prolific and controversial superstars. Trying to pin down a simple discography<sup>5</sup> was a herculean task. Even the basic facts of his life—including his birth year and hometown—were often inaccurate, and the usual places one would go for this information, such as *Allmusic.com* and *The Rough Guide to Reggae*, did little more than spin the same well-worn two-dimensional story about Yellowman. In fact, the more sources I dug up, the more I was disappointed that there seemed to be only one angle, one side, one “riff” about Yellowman. It was as if every journalist had either asked him the same questions or simply copied the biographical sketch offered by their peers

---

<sup>5</sup> One recurring problem with research on Yellowman's discography is that there is no documentation of all the Jamaican releases. Yellowman recorded for several producers, each of whom was free to release tracks as singles or albums, license them to off shore record companies to be compiled as “Greatest Hits” compilations, or license entire albums to other labels who would often market them under another name and with different artwork in a separate country.

when writing about the man they billed as the King of Dancehall or the King of Slack

Even my preliminary research hinted that Yellowman was a far more complex character than these glosses allowed. My short interview with him that day only confirmed this, we spoke about the culture and slack categories and how he routinely overlapped them. I left Montreal satisfied with his performance but longing for more context to his music and life. This is how I became interested in Yellowman and why in 2007 he became the focus of my Ph D dissertation at Wilfrid Laurier University.

### **Slackness Versus Pure<sup>6</sup> Culture: An Introduction to Yellowman**

The above mentioned popular depictions of Yellowman follow a modernist desire for unity in an artist's oeuvre, and look for conformity across Yellowman's life and career. By doing so they project a presumed and inaccurate congruency on his material.<sup>7</sup> In this case that congruency meant that Yellowman was solely portrayed as a slackness deejay and his critics did not wrestle with what that meant in light of the fact that he considers himself a Rastafarian and has many cultural songs.

To get a better sense of who Yellowman is, what he does and how he is understood in popular culture, I turn now to an account of another concert. This concert took place at the Negril Tree House in the West Jamaican resort town of Negril on February 21, 1987. King Yellowman stood on stage, behind him was the Sagittarius

---

<sup>6</sup> In patois, the meaning of pure is extended from standard English to also include "only" or "nothing but" (Cassidy 2002, 367)

<sup>7</sup> I draw on the work of J. Z. Smith (1978) here who, in his critique of the phenomenology of religion, says that methodologies that seek to emphasize congruency and conformity project a presumed comprehension on the data. In short, if you set out to find congruency through the search for patterns, repetition and replication, you will achieve it. Following Smith I am interested in the dimension of incongruity in Yellowman's life, art and religion.

Band, his backing band since 1982 Yellowman's set consisted of some of the rudest songs in his catalogue—"Nuff Punany," "Under Gal Frock," "Galong Galong Galong," "Same Way It Taste," and "Don't Drop Your Pants"<sup>8</sup> Beside him stood noted cultural deejay Charlie Chaplin, a man known for chatting Afrocentric, Rasta-inspired and socially conscious lyrics As often happens in these ludic deejay clashes the two entertainers took turns trying to win over the crowd, each using their tried and true arsenal, Yellowman with his slackness and Chaplin with his cultural lyrics

The concert was bootlegged without the knowledge of the performers and later packaged and sold on cassette tapes and vinyl records with the title *Slackness Versus Pure Culture*, released by ROIR Records<sup>9</sup> The title suggests that slackness and culture are opposites and that each deejay is the antithesis of the other It plays on the Jamaican cultural trope of musical clashes where two opponents stage a musical battle and the crowd decides who wins With the *Slackness Versus Pure Culture* release, the album's promoters were also playing off the common polarity found in reggae music, suggesting again that each artist represented an orthodox moral polarity However, what is fascinating about the set is that this is not always so Yellowman does provide his share of sexually explicit material, but at one point he joins Charlie Chaplin in singing the "Lord's Prayer," only then to turn around and make jokes about oral sex He contests his representation as a slackness deejay by telling the crowd that he can chat rude lyrics or cultural lyrics

Me a change the style, haffi change the style 'cause nuff people think say

---

<sup>8</sup> *Punany*, *Punaany* or *punnany*, like *pum pum*, is a patois euphemism for vagina, *Galong* can be translated as "go on" or "get lost"

<sup>9</sup> Some subsequent pressings carry the title *Negril Chill Challenge*

Yellowman can't chat culture and all them ting Me is a deejay mix  
everything When me rude me get rude, and when me don't want get rude me  
don't get rude, seen?

—Yellowman, in between song banter, *Negril Chill*

Yellowman then breaks into “Galong Galong Galong” followed by “Jah Me Fear” Both these songs present Yellowman’s view of immorality including South African apartheid, racism, poverty, prostitution, pornography and homosexuality, and both songs use sexual imagery, and at times sexual maledicta, to make the point

For anyone familiar with Yellowman, or dancehall, the above performance, with its shifting between slackness and culture, is not out of the ordinary Almost every Yellowman album released complicates the notion that he is, in a simplistic or fixed way, the King of Slack, because they almost all contain cultural material and often use sexually explicit lyrics to make a moral point Yet the representation of Yellowman in popular culture as an essentialized rude deejay persists This caricature portrays him as a) a novelty artist who overcame extreme prejudice because he was born a black albino and then used his skin colour as an advantage in a quintessential rags to riches story, b) the artist responsible for plumbing new depths of vulgarity and popularizing slackness in reggae, and c) the artist who singlehandedly sounded the death knell on the Rastafari-driven cultural era of roots reggae in the seventies and gave birth to the raw, digital, materialistic, sexually frantic and violent genre of dancehall in the eighties

Most of this is basically true on the surface, though it is also under researched, dehistoricized and decontextualized Yellowman was orphaned as an infant due to his albinism and spent the first 19 years of his life in orphanages and government institutions

with names that included adjectives like “abandoned” (Alpha Boys School for Abandoned Children) and “unfortunate” (Eventide Home for the Unfortunate). Ridiculed and friendless because of his colour he was beat up when he tried to audition for music producers like Harry J, Joe Gibbs, Jo Jo Hookim, Byron Lee and Neville Lee. He used his skin colour and outsider status to refashion himself as an unlikely sex symbol in Kingston’s dancehalls in the late seventies. He was so successful that by 1982 he was literally causing traffic jams, not only in Kingston, but also in the streets of London at his first concert appearance there. If you peruse his vast catalogue you will find a list of song titles that would make most readers blush and many angry with terms like sexist, misogynistic, vulgar, obscene, homophobic and even adolescent coming to mind.

That being said, a deeper analysis of Yellowman’s life and recorded output suggests that his slackness can be read in the context of his Rastafarian faith, providing a more complex interpretation of his sexual ethics. Yellowman’s understanding and use of slackness is at the heart of this study. In Section III Chapter 3 I explore the 1985 album *Galong Galong Galong*, which contains several sexually explicit lyrics, yet does so in order to promote a culturally and religiously prescribed idea of sexual morality. In the title track, for instance, Yellowman tells us in sometimes graphic detail that prostitution, homosexuality, oral sex and pornography are acts that are against Rastafari and “Jah law.” So while sex is used only for entertainment in some songs, he also uses sex lyrics to promote Rastafarian sexual ethics, or right morality, in others. As such a reading of Yellowman that only understands him as a slackness deejay fails to acknowledge his religious faith and how his religious values influence his sexual ethics.

## **The Sacred with the Profane**

Religious studies scholars have moved beyond the traditional binary models that view the sacred and profane in an oppositional relationship (Durkheim 1912, Eliade 1959, Weber 1958). Critiquing these models, McDannell says that by linking the sacred to the religious and the profane to the secular “our ability to understand how religion works in the real world” is constrained (McDannell 1995, 4). McDannell examined average American Christian attitudes toward the sacred and the profane and found that, in practice, people regularly scramble this relationship and do not necessarily see these categories as opposites. She offers plenty of examples of the shuttling between, or intermingling of, the sacred and profane, such as t-shirts that use a Coca-Cola motif to advertise Jesus Christ. Orsi’s (2010) “lived religion” also problematizes simple binaries between sacred and profane. Like McDannell, Orsi pays attention to how believers, such as Italian Catholics in Harlem, practice their religion in everyday life and finds that the relationship between the sacred and profane is far more complex than religious orthodoxy suggests and earlier scholarly models imagined.

Several scholars of African diasporic religion argue that the African religious worldview regarding the sacred in everyday life has continued to varying degrees in the diaspora. Smitherman (1977) and Best (2005) have illustrated the black church’s ability to balance an other-worldly orientation with coping strategies for this world. Speaking of the black church, Smitherman writes “no sharp dichotomy exists, but a kind of sacred-secular circular continuum” (Smitherman 1977, 93). Best’s study of black churches in Chicago during the early twentieth century found that they intermingled traditional Christian sacred/secular models by sacralizing social outreach. Duncan (2008) argues for

a similar orientation among Spiritual Baptists in Toronto “So spiritually, so carnally,” an expression used by church members, “encapsulates a worldview that positions Spiritual Baptists as not solely otherworldly in orientation” (Duncan 2008 95-96) Like in other African and African diasporic religious communities, Spiritual Baptists see the profane through the sacred and understand the religious “as manifest in seemingly mundane or ordinary everyday events” (Ibid , 97)

Smitherman and Reed (2003) extend this orientation to African-American secular music forms and suggest that black musicians “easily flow in and out of both worlds” (Smitherman 1977, 93) Reed illustrates this notion by suggesting that non-religious music did not exist for enslaved Africans in the diaspora African-American spirituals, for instance, collapsed boundaries between sacred and secular because their performance was not restricted by space or time—they could be sung in a church during a worship service or in the fields accompanying a harvest—and they broke down the barriers between performer and audience Cooper (2005) shifts this argument to dancehall and suggests that slack lyrics and highly sexualized dance routines, while considered vulgar from a European Christian point of view, can be theorized as part of the African religious worldview of “wholeness” whereby the sacred and profane are integrated She contextualizes slack dancehall in Afro-Caribbean religious forms such as Convince <sup>10</sup>

The above theoretical models suggest a collapsing of the sacred and profane in everyday life and reinforce my observation that the standard way journalists and scholars have portrayed Yellowman is one sided and largely uninterrogated They have understood him as wholly profane, based on his lyrics about sex and his suggestive performances,

---

<sup>10</sup> I discuss this further in Section III Chapter 3

they have not paid attention to the fact that he also has multiple songs voicing religious, political and social concerns, or that his worldview can be situated in an African diasporic orientation regarding the sacred. Yellowman self identifies as a Catholic and Rastafarian. This side of Yellowman has been bracketed and discarded by cultural commentators. Instead, I argue that Yellowman scrambles the sacred and the profane, he puts them side by side so that a Yellowman album can, and almost always does, include songs about sex and religion. The more I analysed Yellowman's lyrics the more I came to realize that for him sex and religion can go hand in hand, and further, one can be found in the other. In Section III Chapter 4 I situate Yellowman's mixing of the sacred and profane in the Rastafarian binary relationship of Babylon/Zion and show how Afro-Caribbean religion has redefined Christian dualism using an Afrocentric body-positive ideology.

McDannell provides a second critique of western religious scholarship that is also helpful here. She argues that there is a Platonic emphasis on the mind/spirit over the body/earth when studying religion. "to turn from spirit toward the bodily realm is to move toward evil, the negation of the spiritual" (McDannell 1995, 9). This helps us contextualize how non-reproductive sexuality outside of marriage, for instance, in western Christianity is aligned with profanity. I argue that Yellowman realizes the role sexuality plays in colonial Christianity and his use of slack lyrics can not only be read as a resistance to Christianity but an acceptance of African-based religious attitudes that do not confine the body to the profane realm.

McDannell's critique of Platonic dualism in scholarship can also be extended to reggae journalism and critiques of Caribbean religion. Ever since Bob Marley virtually eclipsed every other reggae artist for British, American and Canadian audiences, western

music journalism has privileged roots reggae's socially conscious and Rastafarian thematic scope over reggae that has focused on carnal concerns such as money, ego-centric boasting and the body. There is somewhat of a double standard when it comes to reggae and hip-hop because rock, pop, R&B and country—forms of music that also regularly feature sexual innuendo and sexist stereotypes—are not singled out as morally depraved. Tupac Shakur once complained that violent Quentin Tarantino films are critically acclaimed while his violent songs are openly criticized (Dyson 2001, 127). Likewise dancehall's celebrations of the body are regularly maligned by foreigners who are silent about open sexuality in other forms of music. This project will challenge the way reggae history has been written by showing that roots reggae has a long tradition of slackness rooted in Jamaican mento and Trinidadian calypso and that Yellowman's dancehall reggae can not only be understood as an inevitable progression of slackness in Jamaican popular culture but also maintains a socially conscious agenda.

### **“Sexuality” and “Body”: Terms of Reference**

Sexuality as used in this dissertation does not simply imply sexual orientation, genitalia and/or gender. Nor is sexuality synonymous with coitus. My use of the term recognizes that “while sexuality is not the whole of who we are as human beings, it is basic to who we are” and that it is integral to how we relate to the world (Douglas 1999, 6). It includes, but is not limited to, psychological, physical, emotional, spiritual, intellectual, social and personal dimensions (Farley 2008). Definitions of sexuality are difficult to pin down, dictionary definitions are, typically, concerned with biological

meanings and are conservative and narrow in their focus. In addition, standard definitions of sexuality often reproduce heteronormative discourses that exclude discussions of non-heteronormative sexualities and sexual practices. In her work, Collins (2005) has avoided a tight definition of the term because sexuality is subject to definitional difficulties<sup>11</sup>. Instead, work on black sexual politics sets defining boundaries around the term by working from the perspective that there is an intersecting relationship between sexuality, race, class and gender. Of this relationship Collins writes

Intersectional paradigms view race, class, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, and age, among others, as mutually constructing systems of power. Because these systems permeate all social relations, untangling their effects in any given situation or for any given population remains difficult (Ibid 2005, 11)

In Section III Chapter 1 I follow Collins's framework by contextualizing Yellowman's slackness in cultural-specific meanings ascribed to these intersecting categories. Using a similar methodological approach as Collins, LaFont (2001), taking Weeks' advice that "sexuality can be understood only in its specific historical and cultural context" (1995, 6), has researched Afro-Jamaican sexual *morés* by concentrating on how Afro-Jamaicans have historically negotiated, contested and created sexualities over time and across gender, class and race. Noting the methodological complications with using the term sexuality, LaFont uses the pluralized form to denote the varieties of "sexualities" in existence in the Jamaican context. I use LaFont's categories, research and arguments regarding sexuality throughout the dissertation. Like LaFont I find the term *morés* helpful for describing what I want to convey when referring to culturally specific sexual

---

<sup>11</sup> Indeed, many scholars whose work is intimately concerned with sexuality never attempt to define it (Cooper 2004, Cummings 2010, Hope 2006, Salih 2007, Saunders 2003, Stoler 2002, Tafari-Ama 2006, Urban 2003)

conventions in association with Yellowman primarily and Afro-Jamaican culture secondarily. According to the OED, *morés* are “the shared habits, manners, and customs of a community or social group, spec the normative conventions and attitudes embodying the fundamental moral values of a particular society, the contravention or rejection of which by individuals or subgroups is liable to be perceived as a threat to stability.” The stress here on moral values as well as the implication that there is a threat to the dominant group if these values are contravened matches my argument put forth in Section III Chapter 3 that Yellowman used Afro-Jamaican *morés* to condemn sexualities and sexual practices that he deemed deviant.<sup>12</sup>

Following this, it may be of some assistance to readers to specify how I use terms such as “sexuality” and “body” in relation to Yellowman. When I say that Yellowman uses sexuality in his songs, I mean that he employs slackness, or narratives of a sexual nature (such as songs about sexual encounters, sexual desire, female sexual conquest, lyrics centred on genitalia and sexualized bodies), and the use of sexualized performance methods (using the microphone as a phallus, enacting suggestive dance moves, beckoning to women in the audience). In Section III Chapter 4 I focus on Christian and Rastafarian dualism and use the terms body or bodily realm as binaries to spirit or spiritual realm. Body in this usage refers to what in Christian discourse is known as carnality “pertaining to the body as the seat of passions or appetites, fleshly, sensual” (OED).

Realizing that the terms sexuality and body are loaded with heteronormative

---

<sup>12</sup> My use of deviant in this dissertation is not judgmental but is meant to signify something that deviates from heteronormal as conceived under the rubric of Afro-Caribbean mores.

connotations due to socially constructed ideas of masculinity and femininity, and that several scholars have contested this as the sum of Caribbean identity (Batra 2010, Cummings 2010, Gutzmore 2004, Salih 2007, Silvera 1997), I am in no way intending to assign gender or orientation to these terms<sup>13</sup> Yellowman is a heterosexual male and as such my engagement with sexuality in this dissertation is framed by my subject, but my usage of the term sexuality does not preclude non-heteronormative sexualities and sexual practices

Undergirding my discussion of Yellowman is the importance of the concept of body It was his (biological) albino body that left him orphaned as an infant Pinn reminds us that the social “construction of black bodies entails the assumption of difference and, more to the point, the inscription of difference as a fundamental negation” (Pinn 2009, 5) Pinn speaks of bodies as both metaphor and material The term metaphor here conveys the constructed meanings inscribed on the body via a history of a constellation of powers—political, social, cultural, military, religious—that mapped out a particular meaning for a specific time and place In Yellowman’s case that meaning was freak of nature and the time and place was late colonial Jamaica

As I argue in Section III Chapter 1, Jamaican cultural codes questioned the masculinity, race, nation and procreative ability (which I signify by using the term sexuality) of the dundus or black albino My analysis suggests that it was imperative for Yellowman (whether consciously or not) to use his body as a site of reconstructed meaning in order to negate assumptions assigned to it by society and rewrite the parameters of the metaphoric meaning of the albino body In other words, his project was

---

<sup>13</sup> For a survey of the fields of studies pertaining to sexualities in the Caribbean, see Sharpe and Pinto 2006

nothing less than a revalorization of the albino body enacted by deconstructing the social myths associated with his body and reconstructing new meanings. The new meanings, of course, were derived exclusively from the heteronormative discourse that characterizes Afro-creole ideologies of sexuality.

### **Slackness is Culture: A Summary of my Argument**

In looking at Yellowman's slackness I am employing Cooper's theory that slackness is a "metaphorical revolt against law and order, an undermining of consensual standards of decency" (Cooper 1995, 141). I suggest that Yellowman's slackness is informed by Rastafarian ideologies of sexuality and anti-colonial resistance. Furthermore, I argue that Rastafarian sexual ethics often contradict mainstream Jamaican Christian morality so that for Yellowman slackness is not immoral. The term culture is used in reggae to depict music that is lyrically and thematically aligned with Afrocentric biblical exegesis, Ethiopianism, Ital Living,<sup>14</sup> Jahworks,<sup>15</sup> a view of Haile Selassie as God and/or the second coming of Christ, repatriation to Zion/Ethiopia, celebrations of African culture and history, songs calling for Babylon to be chanted down, theocratic political critiques of Babylon's machinations, black nationalism, and a concern for the "sufferahs," or underclasses. I suggest that for Yellowman, the slack/culture dichotomy is eroded when slackness becomes part of the religious repertoire of resistance against mainstream Jamaican society. Slackness, for Yellowman, is culture. My dissertation asks what role Rastafari plays in the formation of Yellowman's discourse on sexuality, gender,

---

<sup>14</sup> Right or natural living, according to Rastafari

<sup>15</sup> Deeds that either promote or are prescribed by Jah and Rastafari

masculinity and sexism and how this affects the moral categorical distinctions of slack and culture in Yellowman's music?

I want to challenge the binary oppositional categories of slackness and culture. Artists and fans within reggae culture have long played at blurring the lines between slack and culture, whether it was Bob Marley singing the subtly suggestive "Stir it Up," Yellowman deejaying the lyric "you can't go to Zion with a carnal mind" or Lady Saw explicitly telling an audience how tight her pum pum is and then singing a gospel song. Scholars and historians have too often offered reductionist definitions of dancehall and slackness (Burton 1997, Gilroy 1987, Seaga 2009, Steffens (in Burnett 2006), Stolzoff 2000, Tafari-Ama 2006, Thomas 2004). This study, instead, follows scholars such as Cooper (1989, 1990, 1994a, 1995, 2004), Hope (2006), LaFont (2001), Saunders (2003) and Stanley-Niaah (2005, 2006) who have given us new theoretical tools to contextualize slackness in the Jamaican cultural and religious experience.

I follow Cooper's extensive work on theorizing the slack/culture dichotomy in particular. In her pioneering work on this binary (1989, 1990) she theorized the set as the hierarchical low and high culture respectively, suggesting that slackness inverts this hierarchy and contests the Eurocentricity of definitions of high culture. But while she shows them to be opposites, she also allows for fluidity between the boundaries of each, exemplified in songs that confront the dialectical relationship of slackness and culture (Cooper 1995, 143). In a later chapter that revisits this essay Cooper again posits slackness as at once the "antithesis of uppercase Culture," meaning high or respectable (read European, Afrophobic) culture, but sees in it the ability to carve out alternate definitions of culture, meaning the discrete culture of dancehall as a promiscuous but

politically subversive space (Cooper 2004, 3-4) Cooper later broadened her argument by including “conscious” or “cultural” reggae in the slackness/culture binary suggesting that in contemporary reggae music one finds a coming together of both slackness and consciousness (Cooper 1994b)

Cooper has also spoken of a “continuity of subversive values” between cultural reggae and slack dancehall, not only does she point out carnal elements in dancehall’s forebears (in Bob Marley’s “Kinky Reggae” for example) she demonstrates how the politics of subversion at work in slack dancehall is multifaceted—slackness contests mainstream value-norms just as the conscious lyrics of Bob Marley contested colonial ideologies (Cooper 2004, 75) Cooper has exerted much academic energy demonstrating that slackness confronts “the patriarchal gender ideology and the duplicitous morality of fundamentalist Jamaican society” (Ibid , 3) and offers an Afrocentric understanding of the body and sexuality that is radically opposed to standard Christian morality (Cooper 1995, 148) Of the slackness/culture dichotomy she writes

Its culturally specific manifestations in Jamaica suggest not only the continuity of West African ideological traditions in the diaspora, but also the conflict between those traditions and official Christian morality of the Garden of Eden in which both the suppression of sexuality and the secondariness of women are institutionalized (Ibid )

Cooper suggests that slackness should be read as a West African-derived model of wholeness in society where the body and spirit are not separated in binary opposites as in European Christianity (Ibid ) In the Christian model Adam conceals his nakedness from God, Augustine pinpointed the Garden of Eden and Adam’s fall as the introduction of sexuality as sin and Christians have been burdened with a theology of the carnal/spiritual

binary ever since. But dancehall reclaims the positive body-image and sexuality of African spirituality.

Cooper's work on the slackness/culture dichotomy is integral to this project. Her theory helps answer the question "does slackness act as a politics of subversion in Yellowman's songs and if so in what ways?" I hope to move the discussion forward by theorizing four ways slackness functions in Yellowman's music, including exploring what Cooper means by a West African model of wholeness that transcends or stands alternative to western duality. By contextualizing Yellowman in Rastafarian discourses of sexuality I am also broadening the focus of the discourse on the slackness-culture binary and arguing that slackness can be read as a religiously motivated politics of subversion.

The four analytical chapters that make up Section III of the dissertation probe the meaning and function of slackness in Yellowman's songs and in Jamaican society and offer four ways to theorize slackness in Yellowman's music. These chapters delve deeply into the dominant issues I see Yellowman's life presenting for academic study. First, slackness for Yellowman drew on a rich history of rudeness in Caribbean music as a means of critiquing mainstream value-norms, second he employed slackness as a subversive method to gain control of his representation in society and win for himself important racial and masculine credentials that as an albino he was denied, third, slackness was executed deliberately as a means to enforce right morality he defines as "Jah law," often through an argumentative discursive tactic known as "tracing" in Jamaica, and last, slackness demonstrates what I call a perforated dualism found in Rastafari that on the one hand uses a western Christian derived dualistic worldview but allows room for the pairing of the sexual and the spiritual.

The four analytical chapters in Section III follow these four arguments. In Section III Chapter 1 I begin by contextualizing albinism in Jamaica's colonial legacy, and then discuss race, sexuality and masculinity in Yellowman's life experience and music. I argue that Yellowman inverted society's representation of him by turning albinism into a site of super-sexuality where the yellow body is refashioned as the "modern body." I work from Patricia Hill Collins' (2004) theory of the "new racism" and suggest that Yellowman embraced established stereotypes that mapped black bodies with animalistic and hypersexual tendencies in order to convince his audience of his blackness and his manhood and thereby to alleviate the albino's interstitial place in the Jamaican nation. In addition, Yellowman's deployment of potent Rastafarian symbols such as Haile Selassie, ganja, the Ethiopian flag and the Africa continent helped him adopt a black African identity and further allowed him to alter his outsider status.

Section III Chapter 2 includes a literature review of how Yellowman has been represented in both the popular and scholarly literature. Its aim is to demonstrate that Yellowman and dancehall reggae have been constructed in a dichotomous relationship with Bob Marley and roots reggae, whereas in reality this opposition has many rupture points. Yellowman does not necessarily, as critics have claimed, represent a departure or decline from Rastafarian moral leadership. In this chapter I use Obika Gray's (2004) theory that the Jamaican under classes in the late seventies and early eighties employed slackness as a deliberate tactic to contest the moral sway of mainstream society and apply it to Yellowman, who was at the forefront of the slackness movement at the time. By offering an alternative value system that upheld the *morés* of the lower classes Yellowman contested mainstream society's attempt to define authentic Jamaicanness and

disrupted the Christian, colonial, and upper class agenda to police the sexuality of the black poor. Moral regulation by the state, Gray suggests, was necessary for the elites to remain in power as sexual docility meant political submissiveness (Ibid.)

Section III Chapter 3 focuses on the histories and ideologies of sexuality that influence what LaFont (2001) calls the creolized sexuality of Afro-Jamaicans. I show how Yellowman's sexual ethics are in keeping with this narrowly defined sexual respectability and argue that one way slackness functions in his songs is for the purposes of moral regulation. Yellowman often uses licentious lyrics to "trace" moral shortcomings for his audience with the purpose of espousing correct sexual behaviour according to his ethical perspective as a Rastafarian. I use his song "Galong Galong Galong" as an example of one such trace and demonstrate that Yellowman has a moral imperative, espousing "correct" sexual behaviour while reprobating unrespectable sexual behaviour.

In Section III Chapter 4 I argue that Yellowman's ability to rupture the traditional western dualistic split of flesh and spirit by continually mixing slackness and culture in his songs is not only derived from a West African non-dualistic framework but also has a parallel in the Rastafarian Babylon/Zion polarity. Under the Rastafarian rubric the body is not anathema to the spirit as long as it maintains purity. By focusing on the lyric "you can't go to Zion with a carnal mind" I demonstrate how for Yellowman the body, sexuality and slackness are not degraded and sinful, as in Western Christian traditions. Yellowman's morality and sexual ethics are rooted in an African-based ideology that was sex-positive, life affirming and stood apart from the platonic dualism of Eurocentric thought that divided the world into the elevated spiritual realm and the denigrated physical realm. Instead respectable sexuality and a natural body are morally upstanding.

attributes and perfectly acceptable in Zion

Slackness was employed by Yellowman both for purely entertainment purposes (slackness for the sake of slackness) as well as for social, political and religious critique. By far the number one reason Yellowman sang and deejayed slackness lyrics was that they were popular and allowed him to build an audience following. Yellowman's slackness functioned and was used in several cogent ways in his material, sometimes consciously, sometimes not.

## **Special Issues Related to the Research**

### ***a. Who is a Rasta?***

One problem that must be addressed in this project is how to define who is and who is not a Rastafarian. Yellowman does not outwardly appear to be a Rasta, unlike the quintessential Rastaman of Jamaican tourist board commercials or myriad reggae covers. Yellowman does not have black skin, does not wear his hair in dreadlocks, does not smoke marijuana, rarely wears the red, gold and green colours symbolic of Rastafari and Ethiopia or display any of the other symbolic manifestations of the religion.<sup>16</sup> In fact, authors who have argued that Yellowman represents a break with the Rastafari dominated era of reggae (Chevannes 1999, Stolzoff 2000) tacitly imply that Yellowman is not a Rasta. Over the course of my research several people reacted with disbelief when I informed them that Yellowman considers himself a Rasta.

---

<sup>16</sup> I am indebted to Donna Hope's work on new representations of Rastafari in dancehall. Hope looks at the image of the "Gangsta Ras" that borrows hardcore fashion from dancehall and hip-hop and moves away from the traditional clothing of Rasta reggae artists (Hope 2008b).

Trying to determine membership in Rastafari is problematic. There are no creeds, initiation rituals, or mandatory beliefs and practices that are agreed upon by all Rastas. Similarly, trying to determine where Rastafari begins and ends is difficult for scholars. Wilfred Cantwell Smith (1963) reminds us that there is no single entity called, for instance, Christianity, Buddhism or Hinduism. Instead there are various streams of religious life within each tradition. This is especially true of Rastafari, a religion that eschews institutionalization (Chevannes 2006, Edmonds 2003). The belief systems of Rastafari are predominantly constructed by each individual member (Murrell 1998). Pollard (1994), for instance, speaks of “own-built Rastas,” who follow the religion at an individual level without joining one of the three Rasta organizations called houses: Nyabinghi, Twelve Tribes or Bobo Ashanti. To follow Smith then, there are as many Rastas as there are Rastafarians.

Even pinning down universal beliefs among members is a difficult task. Yawney maintains that “Rasta ideology is a continuously evolving and open-ended proposition, forged in dialectic fashion through the process of reasoning” (Yawney 1976, 242)<sup>17</sup>. According to Murrell (1998) Rastafarian beliefs underwent an alteration in the seventies, partly due to the greater acceptance the group enjoyed in Jamaican society, and also due to the death of Haile Selassie in 1975.<sup>18</sup> Previous to this there were six beliefs: Murrell considers movement-wide: the beauty of African heritage, the belief that Ras Tafari Haile Selassie I is the living God, the belief in pending repatriation to Ethiopia (Africa), the true home and redemption of black people, the belief that white society’s ways are evil,

---

<sup>17</sup> Reasoning is a dialogical discussion between two or more Rastas

<sup>18</sup> Rastas would consider this a disappearance, rather than a death (Edmonds 1998)

the belief that Jamaica is part of Babylon and one day will crumble and the master/slave pattern of existence will be reversed, the belief that Selassie will overthrow the present order and all blacks will reign with Jah in Zion (Murrell 1998, 5) By the early eighties repatriation was reinterpreted as either “voluntary migration to Africa, returning to Africa culturally and symbolically, or rejecting western values and preserving African roots and black pride” (Ibid 6) In addition, the belief that whites are inherently evil became softened and Babylon, once conceived of as the land of exile, now took on new meaning as all oppression and corruption in the world and the systems that sustain them (Ibid ) Yawney concludes that Rastas “agree on the political content of their ideology, but not on its cultural expression They are not bound up in their own symbol system but may feel free to disregard it” (Yawney 1976, 239) As such, there is great diversity in opinions over smoking ganja, growing dreadlocks, repatriation to Africa, joining the Ethiopian Orthodox Church, and observing dietary restrictions and social taboos

Dealing with this diversity in beliefs among Rastafari, Edmonds suggests that there are only two central beliefs all Rastas agree on a common sense of evil (Babylon) and a common sense of identity and solidarity This identity is characterized by a common African past, the recognition of the historical suffering of slavery, a shared sense of pain living in poverty in Jamaica and the common struggle for liberation from oppression and injustice (Edmonds 1998, 353)

With this in mind, how can we ascertain membership in Rastafari? Tweed’s work on western Buddhists is instructive here, there are many people who are interested in Buddhism but not officially affiliated with any of its institutions (Tweed 2002) Tweed sees the presence of what he calls religious sympathizers as problematic for religious

studies scholars because traditional models of defining religious membership fail to account for them. Such models often lump people into rigid categories of adherent or non-adherent based on methodologies that privilege orthodoxy and institutional structure. An example of this is what Tweed calls the essentialist or normative approach: a member is one who accepts prescribed beliefs and practices. The problem with this is that essentialist approaches imagine that religion has a “defining core” that is “static, isolated, unified” and consider orthodoxy the normative standard from which all members are judged (Tweed 2002, 17-18). A second example is the observation model that counts adherents as those persons who join a religious group or participate in a religious ritual. Such attendance strategies depend on an institutional religious model and fail to account for people who have an affiliation with the religion outside of institutions yet see themselves as Buddhist, or in this case Rasta.

What happens when we use these models as standards of religious membership is that many people who may consider themselves members fall through the cracks. In order to take seriously the complexity of the religious identity Tweed proposes that we use self-identification as one standard for identifying religious individuals. In short, if a person says they are a Rasta, the religious studies scholar’s job is to take their claim seriously and learn as much as possible about how they understand their religion.

This project’s particular scope—reggae music and Rastafari—has its own problematic questions concerning religious adherence. When looking at reggae, particularly from a research position that privileges questions of religion, the genre’s close affiliation with Rastafari must be accounted for. If you attend a reggae festival anywhere around the world Rastafarian symbols abound, from the dominating

iconography of Haile Selassie, the Lion of Judah, and Ethiopian national colours to the dreadlocks, ganja, and ample references to Jah in the music, it appears as though reggae music is always imbued with religiosity. This, of course, is up for debate. But it is undeniable that even secular reggae musicians often invoke very meaningful religious symbols in their stage wear, performance, and music. Secular and sacred are never far removed in Jamaican music and, indeed, probably the same could be said about Jamaican society. Yellowman may seem like an unlikely Rastafarian for many, but his case is instructive for understanding reggae artists that maintain cultural, musical, lyrical and material links with Rastafari in their songs, however tenuous or fleeting. Savishinsky reminds us that as Rastafari has taken root around the world, for many adherents their main identification with the movement occurs around more superficial aspects such as reggae, hairstyle, language and clothing (Savishinsky 1994). This has caused some members concern that “the outward appearances, the paraphernalia and the trappings, become the expression of the faith—rather than the deeper philosophy and discipline” (Burke 1977, 14).

I was initially drawn to this project because of what I perceived as the incongruous worldview found in Yellowman’s lyrics, lyrics that show a prolonged engagement with Rastafarian religious and political ideologies. An artist’s lyrics cannot only be a representation of their own values, views and concerns—particularly in dancehall where there is an established tradition of songs as testaments of reality of the life of the artist (known as “reality lyrics”)—but on a deeper level they are also an expression and representation of greater society’s social concerns, expressing collective realities. Such a project would not necessarily require the artist to identify as Rasta

However, by focusing my project to include ethnographic methods and life story I have decided to incorporate more of how Yellowman understands his own religious worldview, as I think this is integral to contextualizing his songs. As such, it was important to ascertain how Yellowman conceived of his own religious affiliation. In an interview I conducted with him in the fall of 2007 he told me that he considers himself a Rasta and a Catholic. In subsequent interviews I have learned that his religious formation at an early age occurred in a Catholic orphanage and he sees this as the underlying basis of his belief system, though he does not partake in Catholic services or rituals other than prayer. He was initially introduced to Rastafari through cultural engagement—knowing Rastafarians and listening to Rastafarian ideas in reggae songs—but says that his decision to become a Rasta occurred when Bob Marley’s bassist, Aston “Familyman” Barrett, brought him into the circle of Rastas that hung around Marley’s 56 Hope Road residence in the late seventies. It was here that Yellowman accepted informal instruction on how to live as a Rasta.

Following Tweed, then, this study takes seriously the self-identification of Yellowman as a Rastafarian, a believer whose worldview is own-built, and works from the premise that the religious individual does not need to be officially affiliated with a religious institution in order to claim membership in it. Whether Yellowman can be considered a member of a religious group known as Rastafarians or not, he employs Rastafarian language, ideologies, and symbols in his music—that is enough to warrant a study of his use of religion. However, I think it goes deeper than this. Yellowman’s use of Rastafari in his songs is, at times, superficial to be sure. But his sustained engagement with the religion over several decades, as shown in songs such as “Natty Sat Upon a

Rock,” “Give Jah Thanks,” “Prayer” and “God Alone,” suggests to me that he finds something in the Rastafarian religious worldview of value and his value system, as I demonstrate in this dissertation, is largely drawn from Rastafari.<sup>19</sup>

McCutcheon (1997) argues that religion is not something “out there” like a ripe fruit hanging on a tree ready to be picked. It is not an autonomous entity—he calls this *sui generis*—that can be incised from the rest of culture and examined on its own. Religion is always interwoven with society, culture, history, politics, and so on. Following this, my project does not seek to hive off an area of Yellowman’s life called religion and scrutinize it. I am not looking at or for specific instances of ritual or belief. Rather, I am looking at the whole man, his life, art, historical context, race, gender, class and so on in order to better understand how he uses religious language, symbols and ideologies and how his worldview balances the slack/culture polarity.

### ***b. The Local Insider Versus the Global Outsider***

In her book *Soundclash* (2004) Carolyn Cooper makes an important observation about scholarship on dancehall and the history of interaction between Jamaicans and international “experts” that she characterizes as a “border clash” (Cooper 2004, 11-12). This is essentially a point about the insider/outsider status of the researcher. As a post-colonial society, Jamaicans have a heritage of foreigners invalidating local knowledge in

---

<sup>19</sup> Yellowman has described himself as both Catholic and Rasta only a few times to me, and mostly talks about himself as a Rastafarian. The focus of my research has been to approach Yellowman’s life and career through the lens of Rastafari, as that is the religious orientation I found most articulated in songs and interviews. I do make note of a sentiment of religious liberalism (Prothero 1996) in Yellowman’s religious thought in later chapters (Section II, Section III Chapters 3 and 4), but indicate in the conclusion that this is an area for further research. A different project could employ a Catholic or Christian lens for studying Yellowman but that is not my agenda here.

favour of their own authoritative perspective. As mentioned above, foreign journalists and even scholars have subscribed to a reading of reggae history that privileges the roots reggae music of Bob Marley—music that was tailored and marketed to the British and American white rock audience by Marley, his band and producer Chris Blackwell—over the locally preferred sounds of dancehall. Foreign journalists were almost unanimous in their condemnation of dancehall because it was not Rasta-centric like roots reggae (Stolzoff 2000). What this has done is position Marley-era roots reggae as authentic reggae and everything that comes after somehow inauthentic for foreigners. It also does an injustice to roots reggae because it imagines it as a single entity, a romanticized ideal type that does not take into account the diversity of artistic expression.

Cooper cautions that outsiders need to take seriously the perspectives of insiders. Her own work is “stubbornly rooted in a politics of place that claims a privileged space for the local and asserts the authority of the native as speaking subject” (Cooper 2004, 2). Artists like Yellowman have two distinct audiences, the local and the global, and the meaning of his songs are often interpreted differently by each. By seeking Yellowman’s own interpretations of his songs, and paying attention to the voices of Jamaican scholars on slackness, I am paying heed to Cooper’s concern that dancehall must be contextualized in its local meaning. She asserts that Stolzoff (2000) and others have critiqued the role of slackness in Jamaica without regard for local epistemologies. One example of this is the perceived sexism in dancehall, which is often disparaged as homophobic and misogynist. A common critique of male dancehall performers like Yellowman or Shabba Ranks is that their lyrics and stage performances are sexist and that by limiting the female to her sexual body parts they objectify women. I initially

interpreted Yellowman's material as sexist—the females in his songs are usually passive sexual agents who are manipulated beyond their control by Yellowman's irresistible sexiness. And many of Yellowman's songs are grocery lists of women he has slept with or colourful names for their genitals. It perplexed me, then, when Yellowman told me that he sings his slack songs for the women in the audience. I could not see how this could be valid. Surely his songs about having sex with hundreds of women were nothing more than the male ego gone wild, pseudo pornographic episodes meant to entertain the testosterone-rich crowds. But in Cooper's research I found corroboration for Yellowman's position. For Cooper dancehall overturns the repressive gender hierarchy and can have a liberating effect on women, as her discussion of *Lady Saw* demonstrates.<sup>20</sup> Sharpe and Pinto neatly sum up Cooper's position: "A Jamaican public discourse that identifies dancehall with slackness, [Cooper] argues, has a gender bias built into the association of slackness with a woman of loose morals." Cooper, she exclaims, claims "that slackness disputes a patriarchal gender ideology" (Sharpe and Pinto 2006).

Further to this Cooper argues that outsiders often fail to recognize the pleasure Jamaican women take in slack lyrics and suggests that they affirm female sexual power.

Self-righteous critics of the sexualized representation of women in Jamaican dancehall culture, who claim to speak unequivocally on behalf of "oppressed" women, often fail to acknowledge the pleasure that women themselves consciously take in the salacious lyrics of both male and female DJs who affirm the sexual power of women (Cooper 2004, 103).

Chude-Sokei corroborates this interpretation.

---

<sup>20</sup> Stolzoff feels that Cooper's liberation theory is overstated and argues that women are still constrained by traditional gender ideologies because dancehall does not change gender power relations or contest heteronormative notions of sexuality (Stolzoff 2000, 106).

From a Western liberal-feminist perspective these lyrics, because they are boldly heterosexual and disdainful of bourgeois sentimentality, seem very sexist and objectifying of women. However, down there in the mire of postcolonial reality, where power is a rare but prized commodity, these women find both affirmation and power in the fear that their sexuality creates in men. It allows them the freedom to navigate around a world of brutality, violence and economic privation” (Chude-Soker 1994, 82)

This is not to suggest that all Caribbean women are affirmed by slack dancehall music, only that slack lyrics are read by some women as an affirmation of black female sexuality<sup>21</sup>. For instance, in a letter to the editor of *The Gleaner*, the vice president of the Business and Professional Women’s Club of Kingston chastised Cooper for suggesting that dancehall lyrics are uplifting and instead offered her own reading of slackness “some of the dancehall lyrics have been used to enslave, subjugate and demoralize women” (Myrie 2003)

Yellowman’s slackness was popular among both genders. He became the King of Dancehall because he had the largest audience and it was his slack material that was the most popular, even when it was banned by Jamaican radio.

My own orientation as an insider/outsider should also be acknowledged here so as not to create what Bruner calls a “false dichotomy,” a separation of the ethnographer from the project that may lead a reader to believe that the data is independent from the method of collecting it (Bruner 1993, 4, Goulet 1998, xxxviii). Knowing something of a researcher’s background informs the reader as to how the ethnographer is approaching their subject and what biases they may bring to the study. Tweed reminds us how

---

<sup>21</sup> Saunders agrees with this but offers an important caveat, women in Jamaica have limited power over their own sexuality and their own body. This unequal power relationship means that females have limited resources for protection from “economic, political and physical violence” (Saunders 2003, 114)

theorists often obscure their position and pretend “that they enjoy a view from everywhere-at-once or nowhere-in-particular” (Tweed 2006, 7) when in reality their point of view drives the research

I am something of an insider/outsider when it comes to reggae. As a white Canadian living in Ontario I have written on reggae as a music journalist, interviewed several key reggae musicians from Jamaica, the U.K. and Canada and have written for, played and sang in reggae or reggae influenced bands for over a decade. Needless to say I have a respectable reggae record collection. I spent my pre-university school-age years in Bermuda, a British territory over a thousand miles north of the Caribbean. In my experience Bermuda’s youth culture was fundamentally influenced by Jamaican popular culture in the eighties. The music we listened to was Jamaican, the clothes we wore were influenced by Jamaican styles and the slang we spoke included many patois phrases picked up from reggae songs. But this vantage point of Jamaican culture was largely skewed by my inability to separate the imagined Jamaica of thousands of reggae songs and the Jamaica that Jamaican nationals daily create and live in. In Section III Chapter 1 I write about how foreign journalists located Rastafarian Marley-esque roots reggae as “authentic” and dancehall as the de-evolution of “real” reggae. This section is based largely on personal experience and reflection because as a music journalist I did the same thing, valuing Rastafarian cultural reggae as morally and aesthetically superior to dancehall.

It was not until my first trip to Jamaica, a few years before beginning my dissertation, that I began to understand just how different Rastafari, reggae and dancehall culture are conceived of locally. This awakening of sorts has been greatly facilitated by

reading Jamaican theorists Carolyn Cooper (1994, 2004), Donna Hope (2006) and Sonjah Stanley-Niaah (2005, 2006), all of whom not only championed dancehall culture as a legitimate field of academic inquiry but challenged Eurocentric and foreign readings of Jamaican culture

### **Babylon System: A History of Suspicion**

In his song “Babylon System” Bob Marley critiqued the religious and academic establishments that perpetrated colonial deceptions such as the inferiority of blacks and African culture, while they promoted the superiority of European culture and religion

Babylon System is the vampire  
Sucking the blood of the sufferers  
Building church and university  
Deceiving the people continually

—Bob Marley, “Babylon System”

As an academic researcher I am mindful of both the history Marley speaks of and the power issues presented when a western white academic directs critical analysis at Rastafari, a religion born out of resistance to western forms of power, privilege, knowledge, religion, society and culture—in short, resistance to Babylon. A post-colonial critique would highlight the fact that I am in a position of privilege and power due to my socio-economic background, my geographic locale, my nationality and even my colour. As author, I wield a very real authority over this text and the people represented in it, many readers will only know Yellowman through what I choose to write. Given the fact that on these multiple levels I (as author, researcher, westerner,<sup>22</sup> white male) am in a

---

<sup>22</sup> Following Charmaine A. Nelson I use the terms west and western to describe European derived culture and its colonial representations (Nelson 2004, 367)

position of power over Yellowman's representation, I must ensure that I am not the protagonist Marley spoke of—the academic deceiver. This concern in part led me to follow Brown's ethnographic methodology whereby the subject's voice is given authority in the text (Brown 2001)<sup>23</sup>

To be sure, Yellowman is by no means a voiceless subject within or without this text. As a superstar of the dancehall world he has enjoyed three decades of liberty to speak his mind through his songs on stage and on record, and in the countless interviews he has granted. It would be wrong to assume that he is not a savvy interview subject, a musician rehearsed at not only getting his own ideas across in an interview, but also controlling how he is represented. For instance, during our interviews I noticed that Yellowman, like most musicians I have interviewed, had scripted answers ready for standard questions. I expected this and it was only after a rapport developed between us that we were able to break new ground and delve deeper into his thoughts and opinions.

As Marley's song attests, there is a history of suspicion among Rastafari concerning western academia, an institution that long supported a colonial view of history. Peter Tosh critiqued the heroic narratives of great western historical figures, recasting them as pirates that plundered non-western civilizations. In "You Can't Blame the Youth" Tosh blasts the education system for telling lies about John Hawkins, Marco Polo, Captain Morgan and Christopher Columbus, men that, in his opinion, were really "robbing, raping, kidnapping and killing"<sup>24</sup>. He then turns his fury to religion saying that

---

<sup>23</sup> Writing in the preface to the 2001 edition of *Mama Lola*, Brown reveals that she was initially troubled by the "problem of voice" who got to speak in the ethnography and from what perspective? Her solution was to include a "chorus of voices." Her decision to privilege multiple voices has been called a "new postmodern ethnography" or a "new feminist ethnography" (Brown 2001, ix).

<sup>24</sup> Peter Tosh, "You Can't Blame the Youth" (Intel Diplo, 1972). Jamaica Kincaid takes up this theme. "In

colonialism taught futile dogma such as life after death. Likewise, Burning Spear, that great educator of Rasta and black history, rejects the grand narrative that Christopher Columbus discovered Jamaica with the most economical of critiques: “Christopher Columbus was a damn blasted liar,” supporting his argument by pointing out that the Arawak Indians were there to greet Columbus.<sup>25</sup>

The education system, like the government and church, is a vestige of colonialism and as such is viewed with suspicion by many Rastas. During his fieldwork among the Rastafari, Chevannes (1994) sometimes found he was distrusted because he was a university researcher. During one exchange some Rastas equated academia with the government, and saw him as an agent of Babylon, even calling him a spy.

The historical animosity between what Rastas call Babylon and the children of Jah extends to the religious genealogy of Rastafari. Rastafari has always defined itself over and against Christianity. Christianity is European and Eurocentric, Rastafari is African-rooted and Afrocentric, Christianity is hierarchical, Rastafari is largely democratic and suspect of hierarchies,<sup>26</sup> Christianity was introduced to Jamaica by whites, privileged whites and taught that God was white, Rastafari was conceived by blacks, privileged blackness by stating that all blacks are divine, and believe that God is black, Christianity is seen as a death cult among Rastafari because of its preoccupation with death—the death of Christ, the use of the crucifix as a dominant symbol, believers must die to be rewarded in heaven. Rastafari eschews, even denies death, preferring to worship a living

---

the Antigua that I knew, we lived on a street named after an English maritime criminal, Horatio Nelson, and all the other streets around us were named after some other English maritime criminals” (Kincaid 1988, 24)

<sup>25</sup> Burning Spear, “Columbus,” *Hail H I M* (EMI, 1980)

<sup>26</sup> There have been leaders, such as Leonard Howell and Prophet Gad, but by and large the religion has remained loosely organized and uncomfortable with autocratic hierarchy.

God and interprets repatriation to Africa as a heavenly journey to Zion that will take place in this life. Finally, Christians view the Bible as a chronological ordering of events that tells the story of their Jewish ancestors and relationship between God and the Israelites. While the Christian Bible is the preeminent text for Rastas, their engagement with it occurs outside the Christian church (Erskine 2005). Rastas treat the Bible not only as a chronological history but also read it in such a way that blurs myth and history. Rastas believe that their ancestors were in fact the Hebrew people of antiquity. The Bible is also understood in a symbolic manner. Rastas see themselves as descendants of the biblical Hebrews but in addition they reconstruct the Hebrew past believing the ancient Hebrews to be Rastafarians. And events of the Hebrew Bible are symbolic versions of modern historical events. For example, Moses and King David were black, Babylon is both the ancient Babylon of the Hebrew Bible and also the white-dominated western world that the African slaves were exiled into. Israel, Zion and the Garden of Eden all become Ethiopia which in itself represents all of Africa to Rastafarians.

Rastafari then has adopted the Christian historical and theological framework but has not accepted it wholesale. Instead it resists the colonial Christian version of biblical stories and instead interprets them, Marcus Garvey style, through the eyes of Ethiopianism. Suspicion regarding western researchers and narratives written by agents of Babylon is a critical factor in this historical setting.

## Goals of the Dissertation

The purposes of this dissertation are threefold. First, I seek to present a sympathetic yet critical interpretation of Yellowman's life. For some this will revalorize a man that history has not taken the time to understand, for others it will validate an artist whose contribution to Jamaican popular culture is momentous, if under appreciated. Second, I will use Yellowman's life story as an opportunity to explore questions of moral regulation and theorize the collapsing of slackness and culture in his work and worldview. I am taking cues here from Prothero's (1996), work on Henry Steel Olcott, a biography and also a critical text devoted to using Olcott's life as an opportunity for scholarly analysis and interpretation. Third, this project will be a case study in the diversity and individuality of the Rastafarian experience. Whereas most of the available texts on the religion offer an overview of the major beliefs, themes, personalities, and history of Rastafari, a biography on a singular practitioner is a unique approach to study Rastafari because it offers one practitioner's views, beliefs and practices. This is particularly important in a religion where, as I have mentioned above, each individual practitioner is free to construct their own belief system. There are a few studies on a single Rastafarian, but none are conclusive. For instance, French music journalist H el ene Lee (2003) wrote an informative biography on key founding Rasta Leonard Howell but its unscholarly nature leaves far more questions than answers. Bob Marley is the only Rasta that has been given enough serious consideration by scholars to warrant several biographies but this attention has overshadowed both reggae and Rastafari so that Marley has come to represent a sort of quintessential ideal type of Rasta. Yellowman is fascinating because he falls so far outside that ideal type.

Rastafari is significant among new religious movements because of its popularity in youth culture around the globe. As an outgrowth of the religion, culture reggae has been the main vehicle to disseminate Rastafari's ideology internationally through artists such as Bob Marley and reggae's popularity has led to the movement making a considerable contribution to popular culture worldwide. Because of Rastafari's international reach and impact, a study focusing on the intersection of Rastafari and reggae is significant for religious studies. While there is an emerging body of literature on Rastafari, my dissertation concentrates on the overlooked area of social critique housed in risqué expressions of sexuality known as slackness.

## CHAPTER 2

### Methodology

#### **Inna Different Version: Reggae and the Caribbean Critical Tradition**

In the song “Three Sides to My Story” by Culture, singer Joseph Hill confides “There are three sides to my story, yours, mine and the truth”<sup>27</sup> Hill is employing a critical methodology here to deconstruct a narrative. Simply put, there is more than one way to look at a story, text, song, life. This song illustrates the existing tradition of critical thinking in everyday life in the Caribbean—the ability to deconstruct an incident and see it from different sides. While I would disagree with Hill that there is a definite “truth” to any story that a) stands apart from any single perspective, or b) exists at all in anything other than a perspective-bound view, Hill’s song is instructive for how ethnography seeks to describe, understand and analyse a culture. Good ethnography uses several viewing angles, it realizes there is no single authoritative narrative to any story, only dominant versions. The truth is found in the perspective, and is fluid, is open to debate, and is, hopefully, multiple.

What I propose to do as an ethnographer of Yellowman’s life, then, is to combine several stories or narrative angles—mine, his, other interviewees’, journalists’, scholars’—and offer a version of the truth, one way to understand Yellowman’s life and career. This is not the definitive version, and it is not the authoritative version. True, it is authorized by Yellowman himself inasmuch as he agreed to be interviewed and observed for the project, but he did not dictate the terms in which he would be represented. Instead,

---

<sup>27</sup> Culture “Three Sides to My Story” (Shanachie 1991)

like Joseph Hill, he realizes a single story has many interpretations. In this way, this project is a creative exercise. By creative I do not mean fictional. I do recognize that it is a retelling, and one that often privileges the autobiographical memories of Yellowman himself. Instead I use the term creative to describe what James Clifford calls true fictions. “ethnographic writing can properly be called fictions in the sense of ‘something made or fashioned’” (Clifford 1986, 6). Nadel’s insight into biography writing is instructive here. “paradoxically, language in biography does not record as much as it reinvents a life” (Nadel 1984, 207). The version of Yellowman’s life I am creating is based largely on subjective methods such as who I decided to interview, which questions I decided to ask, how my consultants chose to answer questions, decisions on what to include and omit in the final writing and how to interpret what remains. Brown reminds us that the ethnographer is responsible for what is included as well as what is excluded (Brown 2001). Perhaps the best advice I have been given when writing a person’s life is that it is the ethnographer’s job to construct a portrait of the individual, a picture the subject would recognize but not necessarily the same portrait they would paint of themselves.<sup>28</sup>

The idea of writing a version of a life has a parallel with reggae music itself. The production of reggae music involves the ongoing re-creation of new versions of old songs. Simply called “versions,” these are iterations of an original musical template released by new artists and often sound like completely different songs. Each version is based on the original song’s rhythm, or “riddim,” as it is known in patois. Riddim can refer to the original song’s entire backing track, which may be adopted for a later

---

<sup>28</sup> I thank Ron Grimes for this advice.

iteration, or it can simply refer to the bass line used in the original song. The preservation of decades of famous bass lines has led to the bass becoming the most important aspect in any reggae song and fans recognize and appreciate the use of a vintage riddim or bass line in a modern song. For example, in 1968 both Toots and the Maytals and Marcia Griffiths had hit songs (“54-46” and “Feel Like Jumping” respectively) based on the Ethiopians’ 1967 classic “Train to Skaville.” The riddim was revived by Supercat in 1986 for his massive hit “Boops.” The song was so popular that the riddim is now usually known as “Boops” instead of its original title, and new versions of the riddim are released every year. Riddim database *Jamrid.com* lists 91 versions of the riddim and, like “Boops,” many riddims have over 100 iterations that may run across several genres of Jamaican music such as ska, rocksteady, reggae, dub and dancehall. A reggae fan may never hear the original iteration of a riddim such as “Full Up”—one of the most versioned foundational riddims in existence—but they will know several versions of the riddim.

Versioning is integral to reggae. It respects and protects the roots of the music, ensuring they are not lost, yet expects and therefore promotes vibrant creativity from an endless stream of new artists. It sets in motion a continuous and ever evolving revival of past music traditions and fads where an artist may use both a mento song from the forties and the previous year’s dancehall hit to generate a new song. While versions are part of the Jamaican musical tradition, artists are free to deconstruct the riddims in their attempt to give the riddim a new stamp of originality. Each artist is free to offer their version of a riddim, including lyrics, themes, musical motifs and bass lines from previous songs and

are often quick to point out to their audience how original their treatment is <sup>29</sup>

Yellowman's songs, like all dancehall deejays in his day, were voiced over existing riddims provided for him by either a record producer or, in the case of live dancehall performances, selectors working the turntables. Yellowman often introduces his versions as "a counteraction," meaning a response to a previous iteration of the song. For instance, he announces at the beginning of "Herbman Smuggling" that this is a "counteraction for satisfaction", on "Shorties" he says "now here come the counteraction", and on "Natty Sat Upon a Rock" his introduction is extended, ensuring the audience that his counteraction is guaranteed to bring them pleasure.

Now here comes counteraction for satisfaction

Ya, someone come fe rock the nation

Give you like a medicine injection, you know?

—Yellowman, introduction to "Natty Sat Upon a Rock"

The implication is often that the deejayed version is a more boisterous counteraction to the sung version, as riddims in the seventies often started their life as a hit for a singer and were then used as backing tracks for deejays. This was especially true in live dancehall shows where the selector might play the sung version first, then replay just the instrumental dub plate for the deejay to improvise on. The counteraction lyric is a common riff for Yellowman, used to introduce many songs, but it also demonstrates the trend in dancehall reggae to add a new voice to an old song, or use a previous idea in a novel way. Yellowman's counteractions are often commentaries on the songs to which he is responding.

---

<sup>29</sup> In an interview with dancehall photographer and historian Beth Lesser, Lesser described for me how an artist may change one lyric in a song and then tout it as "original." The word original here does not mean independently generated but rather refashioned in a novel way (Lesser 2009).

I highlight this to suggest that writing about reggae is, or should be, akin to performing reggae. Yellowman riffs on popular themes and adheres to traditional Jamaican musical forms when he is creating new art. He presents a well-known story from a new angle. As an ethnographer I too am “riffing” in that I am presenting an already known story to many reggae fans but hopefully adding a new dimension, a new angle of depth and critique. I also want to return here to the idea that Caribbean expressive culture has a strong tradition of critical engagement to demonstrate how reggae as a music form is an example of what Gilroy (1993) calls a counterculture of modernity. Later I will show how Yellowman uses sexuality, race and religion to offer a “counteraction” to mainstream society but for now I want to draw a parallel between the structure and aesthetics of reggae music and the practice of critiquing western society.

The use of versioning in reggae was largely popularized by what is known as dubbing. To dub a song is to separate or deconstruct its instrumental elements and rebuild them using studio technology, thereby creating a completely new version of the song. Early dub versions of songs were instrumental B-sides to 45 inch singles—the rhythm track without the vocals. B-side titles were simply labeled as “Version.” Studio engineers such as King Tubby and Lee Perry elevated dubbing to an art form in the early seventies and began to experiment with remixing songs so that they were valued as their own artistic statement. To achieve this they remixed multi-track recordings, adjusting parameters like volume, tone, reverb, echo, and the EQ of individual instruments, thereby creating a product that sounded very different from the original song. This is where the remix trend for pop and dance music started. At its height, when practiced by masters of the craft, a dub version takes on a life of its own with some tracks bathed in reverb or

echoes and other tracks brought into the mix sparingly or omitted altogether

Beckford (2006) has theorized dubbing as an analytical tool of critique, using its technique of deconstruction as a metaphor for academic analysis. Dub uses Euro-American music forms and technologies but uses them in novel ways, borrowing what it finds useful, doing away with what it does not, and adding new ideas. Dub can be seen as an example of Gilroy's (1993) theory of how black expressive culture offers a counterculture to modernity by challenging it, deconstructing it, injecting it with an Afrocentric aesthetic, and refashioning it into something new. Whereas, for instance, Euro-American popular music puts stress on the downbeat, dub often negates the downbeat altogether and emphasizes the third beat of the bar. This is evident in the drum beat known as the one drop, where the drummer, and often the entire band, rests or drops out on the first beat of the bar. Dub also avoids the pop songwriting techniques of American and British rock and R & B bands that often utilize separate chord progressions for verse, chorus and bridge, and organize or structure songs with the vocal chorus as the quintessential musical statement of the song. Dub, in contrast, is content to employ the same chord progression throughout a song preferring to add musical variety via sonic textures and rhythmic variation rather than structural changes. Unlike western music, dub also emphasizes rhythm over melody and utilizes empty space as a musical statement. There are no guitar solos in dub reggae, only anti-solos where melody instruments take a background seat to the bass and drums. Dub usually has little or no vocals. In fact the dominant melody instrument becomes the bass guitar. When you are three blocks away from a dancehall session, it is the bass line you hear and when you leave a reggae show it is the bass line you are humming. Bradley (2001) celebrated the importance of the bass to

Jamaican music when he titled his history of the genre *Bass Culture*, noting the central role the bass has played in reggae history

Yellowman, like all Jamaican deejays in his day, chatted lyrics over top of riddims played either by soundsystems selectors at dancehall events, bands at stage shows or given to him by producers in the studio. Often the original song that the riddim came from gave Yellowman's new song its thematic arc. His song "Step it out of Babylon," for instance, is a cultural song based on Johnny Osbourne's famous "Truths and Rights," and shares the original's Rastafarian bent, while his "Give Me Vagina" is a slack song based on Admiral Bailey's "Punaany." Selectors at soundsystem dances often seam together several songs that use the same riddim in order to form a continuous story or metatext (Stolzoff 2000). The importance of the musical accompaniment is not lost on the audience—they associate certain riddims, as in the example above, with definite ideologies, this is a slack riddim, this is a culture riddim. Riddim as metatext is an important interpretive tool when looking at dancehall. What artists say in their lyrics is as important as how they say it and what riddim they use to say it.

During his early days Yellowman was a highly attuned cultural sponge, able to absorb influences from other deejays and international artists and filter them in his own humorous way for whatever audience happened to be in front of him at the time. Because of this I see Yellowman's career as a series of versions—modern versions of old, sometimes timeless themes. Taking a cue from Beckford's theory of dubbing I am offering my own dub version of Yellowman's life story here.<sup>30</sup> I am presenting it through my own filters and am deconstructing it and analyzing its many parts determined by my

---

<sup>30</sup> I also borrow the idea of writing about reggae in the spirit of "versioning" from Dick Hebdige (1987)

interests in religion and dancehall. Like all dub versions it will make the most sense if engaged alongside the original version. In this case, I recommend that all readers spend time listening to Yellowman's music and watching him either live or on video.

Similarly, what you will find in this text is a literary study of an oral tradition—and written words cannot fully describe the art of orality in the dancehall. As O'Gorman notes, "transcribing the words of DJ songs on paper is, in effect, a distortion, for there is no way in which one can convey the rhythmic subtlety, the unorthodox accentuation of words and the syncopated silences that highlight key words or create a rhythmic push" (O'Gorman 1988, 54). Yellowman is indisputably one of dancehall's most gifted deejays. Apart from his clever lyrics, pointed cultural insights and wry humour, his use of multiple voices and vocal tones, nonsensical scats and rhythmic diversity must be heard to be appreciated and understood. Deejaying is "the use of language as a kaleidoscopically-accentuated pattern of vocables superimposed over the reiterated pattern of the rhythm section" (Ibid, 51).

## **On Ethnography**

### ***a. Why Ethnography?***

I have chosen to use a biographic frame of Yellowman's life to present my arguments regarding slackness and culture and have based much of the biographical material on interviews I conducted with Yellowman and some of his colleagues. This is not a fan biography, but a critical biography based on ethnographic methods and theories rooted in the academic study of religion and culture and of dancehall reggae. It is also not

a hagiography, though I do admit to a kind yet critical representation<sup>31</sup> Being mindful of this, I have tried to keep personal opinions about Yellowman and his music to a minimum I am indeed a fan of his music and my appreciation of his talent has only increased since beginning this research, but I am not without a strong critical view of many of his albums However, this project is not an exercise in evaluating Yellowman's music on an aesthetic basis and, therefore, I have been careful to refrain from such indulgences in the text

Ethnographic fieldwork was suited to my background as a music journalist but rather than wanting Yellowman to dictate a sort of authorized biography to me, I was interested in his point of view and description of life events in order to get a deeper understanding of his views on slackness and religion and to take seriously his own interpretations/intended meanings of his songs Knowing something of the background of why and when the songs were written, and being able to contextualize them in his life, as well as Jamaican culture, is a valuable resource when analyzing them In Talal Asad's essay on *Satanic Verses*, he defends his use of Salman Rushdie's own thoughts on his novel because, he says, an author's intended meanings should not "be fenced off as being irrelevant to the novel" He cites Rushdie, not because he believes him to be "the best authority on his work, but because glosses by Rushdie the embattled author are a crucial part of the book's context and therefore of its meaning" (Asad 1993, 276)

As such the life story presented here is predominantly based on how Yellowman remembers his life and events, sees his fame, and understands his milieu, though the analyses of his life and career are entirely my own I have balanced this autobiographical

---

<sup>31</sup> I am borrowing "kind yet critical" from Prothero's (1996) biography of Henry Steel Olcott

view with other interviews and published material and in instances where I found discrepancies I have left both accounts in the text to present “multiple truths” Rather than attempt an exhaustive biography I have concentrated on events in Yellowman’s life that contextualize my arguments around religion and morality Like any autobiographic material there are problems inherent in this people see themselves in a very different way than do those around them Memory can be selective, subjects and informants can filter events and stories, tailoring them to ensure a positive representation I sought where possible to corroborate these events with other people, such as Yellowman’s manager, band, fellow musicians and producers There are times in the text when corroboration was not possible and when this occurs I present the material as Yellowman’s own

An ethnographer’s job is to study how “people create meaning or significance in their lives” (Brown 2001, 14) As such, ethnographic methods can provide the context for a person’s religious worldview and help researchers understand what theologian Paul Tillich called their ultimate concerns (Tillich 1958) Ethnographic methodologies are a salient way to access personal and cultural information in order to understand Yellowman’s religious worldview, a worldview that includes Rastafarian, African, Catholic and Protestant ideas, his use of slackness as a springboard for fame and a critique of mainstream society, and his ideas surrounding race, sexism, morality and sexual ethics

Music journalists and scholars can rightfully read their own analyses into musical works and life stories and that method could work here However, in reading the scholarly literature and public discourse about Yellowman I discovered that much of it fails to take into account how Yellowman’s songs are understood by the local Jamaican

audience, and often I have found glaring discrepancies between music journalists' interpretation of a song and Yellowman's intended message

In addition, for most of his career Yellowman has been an embattled artist. Besides being the scapegoat for the entire slackness movement, he once had a concert picketed by gay rights activists, he has been the subject of several newspaper articles maligning his use of sexuality in his songs at home and abroad and scholars and historians have often failed to contextualize him in his social milieu. Further to this, many of his personal opinions—outside of his song lyrics—are not published anywhere. I believe they are a valuable part of the meaning of his work and so I have sought to include them here.

### ***b. The Problem of Terminology***

The term "ethnography" means different things in different disciplines and a study of one person's life is not always considered ethnography. Here I follow Karen McCarthy Brown who argued that her book *Mama Lola* was an ethnographic study because, although she focused on one person, she included considerable Haitian and U.S. context (Brown 2001, xiv). Likewise I consider this dissertation an ethnography even though it seeks to understand only one person's life. Much of my methodology is centred on contextualizing Yellowman in the various cultures I believe are necessary for understanding him. These include the religious cultures of Jamaica (colonial Christianity, Afro-Christian religions, Afro-Caribbean religions and, chiefly Rastafari) and the political and social cultures of the island, particularly dancehall culture. In constructing a

life narrative of Yellowman I have attempted to offer a way to understand him based on the ethnos, or community, he grew up in and for whom he wrote music

### ***c. Voice and Authority in Ethnography***

Classic pre-sixties ethnographies were unequivocal about voice and authority, there was only one of each and both belonged to the ethnographer. Classic ethnographies attempted to disguise or forget the fact that there was a researcher involved in studying a community. They attempted to give a pure view unaffected by the researcher. This created a false dichotomy that allowed the reader to believe that the data is independent from the method of collecting it (Goulet 1998). Critics of this method have pointed out that any study that disguises the role of the researcher in manufacturing ethnography distorts reality, and any study that privileges the researcher's voice while ignoring the subject's continues the legacy of the colonial presence in the academy (Ibid, Brown 2001). *Mama Lola*, on the other hand, was touted as "new postmodern ethnography" and "new feminist ethnography" because of its "chorus of voices" (Brown 2001, ix). Brown not only wrote herself into the book, she let the subject, Alourdes, speak for herself in an attempt to "do justice to Alourde's Vodou world" (Ibid, x). Brown and Goulet (1998) were influenced by feminist and postcolonial critiques of the study of religion and recognized the history of unequal power relationships between ethnographers and their subjects. The result is that each of these ethnographies takes pains to distance itself from the earlier models of cultural interpretation of scholars such as Malinowski and Geertz. They also are influenced by the breaking down of the barrier between researcher/subject

or the “us” and “them ” Goulet critiques the Geertz model because it assumes that you can learn about another culture while remaining outside of it—Geertz’s model of interpretive anthropology listens to what a culture tells you about itself Goulet and Brown, instead, practice experiential ethnography or reflexive anthropology that blurs the lines between insider and outsider Both researchers were embedded in their research communities, Goulet among the Dene Tha and Brown with Alourdes’s Vodou community in New York and Haiti, and both used their experience in the field as part of their interpretation of the community Brown, in a radical departure from anthropological tradition, became initiated into the religion she was studying for the purposes of deeper understanding and access, arguing that the heart of the tradition would have been closed to her if she had not

Following scholars like Brown (2001) and Goulet (1998), this project includes the voice of my research subject as a way of displacing any singular authority on my part Brown’s work has been called a feminist or postmodern ethnography, in part due to her efforts to balance voice and authority in her text between researcher and her research community This text presents Yellowman’s voice both implicitly and explicitly He is not an avid story teller in the confines of an interview but he is a highly praised griot on stage and on record His voice is the basis for this project as I am using the “text” of his songs and interviews to interpret his worldview

This work is influenced by reflexive ethnographic methods and is conscious of the role the researcher plays in both dictating the field experience and in constructing the final ethnographic product Both Brown and Goulet include behind the scenes dramas in their ethnographies and struggle with the role the ethnographer has in influencing the

research community. By writing themselves into the text they make these issues transparent for the reader and reinforce that a) there is no such thing as a “pure” ethnographic account, b) the ethnographer is not the expert on the tradition, and c) the ethnographer can directly change/influence the situation. While I do not write myself into this text to the extent that Brown and Goulet have, I am careful not to write myself out

Besides disposing of the classic anthropological presumption that you can glean knowledge from asking a set of questions and observing a set of rituals, Brown found that in order to equal the power relationship she needed to conduct her research in ways that scholars before 1960 would never have imagined. This meant, among other things, entering into a reciprocal relationship with Alourdes, her research subject. Brown gave money, gifts, time, help, airplane tickets, and even a profit-share of the finished book to Alourdes, and in return was the recipient of Alourde’s expertise on Vodou, and access to a community, history, society and culture that would have been closed to her otherwise. Yellowman and I discussed reciprocity at our second meeting. As a celebrity, Yellowman was used to people wanting something from him—from a simple autograph to large sums of money. As a researcher I too wanted something very valuable from him, time and access. The benefits of this project to both of us should be apparent: it assists me in completing the requirements for a doctoral degree. Once published as a book this project will not only broaden Yellowman’s audience, it will also lend a legitimacy to his work in circles where slack music and dancehall are seen as low culture and not worthy of academic study. Taking a cue from Brown, I also offered to let Yellowman read the book with the understanding that if there was something he did not want me to mention, I would refrain from doing so. This negotiation was predicated on the fact that both of us

understood the nature of this project to probe sexual ethics, morality and religious thought using academic methodologies and tools of analysis, and to write an account of his life that would offer a history of events but not sensationalize his stardom as is common in fan-written accounts

Yellowman has not read the entire dissertation but has read most of the life story. Only rarely did he have objections to the material, preferring to keep some details of his personal life private. His main concern in viewing this material was on the accuracy of his own quotes, song lyrics, and historical details of his life. My portrayal of him was not an issue, nor was he overly concerned with ensuring a sort of authorized representation of his persona. This may be, of course, because the frame I use to approach his life and career—problematizing uncritical readings of his slackness—is one that he agrees with.

Finally, this project is not simply an example of listening to a culture describe itself. I make no claims to be a member of Jamaican dancehall culture but growing up in a youth culture strongly influenced by dancehall, and working as a music journalist for several years, I have experiential knowledge of the culture apart from my interviews with Yellowman and this informs my analysis.

#### ***d. Multiple Audiences***

Lastly I have chosen to write this dissertation as an ethnography because I feel a book about Yellowman should be accessible to his fans and general fans of reggae. An ethnography can be close to a critical biography, and at times I have used that term to describe this project. By presenting this research as a life narrative it is my hope that

those non-academics who are interested in reggae culture—the fans—will find it useful. Videos of Yellowman performing in the eighties show him calm and cool on stage—standing still, leaning into the audience, or pacing gently the length of the stage. If you watch him today you see a man in his fifties leaping and running in athletic gear, a ball of energy from the moment he sets foot on stage until he disembarks. When I travelled on tour with Yellowman in the summer of 2008 I asked him at what point he altered his stage show. He told me he realized that his fans like to watch him move energetically in concert so that is what he does. I have realized over the course of this research that this sentiment, the need to please fans, and the need to be loved and appreciated, has been a powerful motivator throughout Yellowman's career. With this in mind, I think it is fitting to create a piece of scholarly work that not only addresses academic concerns, but also offers those fans something that they too can enjoy.

### **Interview Protocol**

The first time I interviewed Yellowman was backstage at the 2005 Montreal International Reggae Festival. I used an analogue tape recorder and shouted my questions over top of the booming bass issuing from the stage 20 feet to my right. The second time I interviewed Yellowman was in October 2007 upstairs at Peabody's Concert Club in Cleveland. I had been given some time to talk to Yellowman before his show. I was there to pitch the idea of my dissertation and was not sure how he would respond. Again, I used my tape recorder and a list of talking points, questions. We discussed the project and after about half an hour he gave his consent.

My fieldwork in Kingston was spread out over three years. I travelled to Jamaica in February 2008, 2009 and 2010 each time remaining for about two weeks. During this time I met with Yellowman often, at his house, and we spent several hours in interviews. While in Kingston I travelled with Yellowman to several concerts to watch him perform and to studios where he recorded dub plates for sound systems around the world. I also spent two weeks following him throughout the northern United States and Ontario to attend concerts during August 2008. While much of my interaction and discussions with Yellowman were informal—in a van on the way to a gig, backstage waiting for him to perform, standing in line to get an ice cream or grocery shopping, the majority of interviews for this project occurred at his kitchen table in a structured format.

Yellowman lives alone in Armour Heights, a rich area in the hills of New Kingston, far removed from the destitution of Trench Town and Concrete Jungle. His house is clean but not really well kept—it has clearly seen better days. It is sparsely furnished and many of the amenities are now in need of repair: the pool, once in use when his children lived there with him, is half full of green water, nautilus gym equipment sits rusting on an outside porch, and there is damage to the zinc roof where hurricane winds lifted the metal off its braces.

When I visited Yellowman I would usually take a taxi and ascend the narrow windy roads up to Stony Hill, the houses and neighbourhoods getting nicer the higher we ascended. It is common in Jamaica to have a regular taxi driver. At that time, Yellowman used a driver named Ted exclusively. Ted became my driver when I first arrived in Kingston in February 2008 and besides transporting me to interviews or on errands, he also became a good source of information on popular culture. Each day he would pick me

up and on the way to Armour Heights we would stop at a plaza and buy food chicken patties for Yellowman, beef patties for me I would routinely stock up on Pepsi for the caffeine and sugar to keep me alert during the long interview sessions

When I arrived at Yellowman's house I would have to call one of his three cell phones or honk loudly to get him to come out and open the white iron gate Yellowman rarely opened the gate to his driveway He preferred to leap over it to greet me, and then insisted that he open it for me There is a basketball net in the driveway and he sometimes paused to shoot baskets, or play with his dog, Big Man, before we headed inside to work Yellowman's house is sparsely furnished, though couches and large televisions are abundant Interviews took place in the kitchen at the back of the house, overlooking Stony Hills through louvered glass windows We sat at the kitchen table, ate our lunch and began our daily conversations

I typically arrived at Yellowman's house during the late morning and stayed sometimes until five or six in the evening We would talk for three or four hours without a break and it amazed me that I routinely got tired before Yellowman, even though he was 52 and had been through several cancer operations and I was in my mid-thirties

All the interviews in Kingston were recorded with a Zoom H2 digital recorder I used structured questions to frame the interviews but let the conversations develop on their own Having several weeks' access to Yellowman was a privilege as it allowed me to revisit important topics later on, follow up on questions that arose from the new material and fact check dates, lyrics, names and story details

## Structure of the Dissertation

Finally, a note on how this dissertation is structured and what is covered. Out of deference to the two main audiences I mentioned above, I experimented with different ways to structure this project. I found that an integrated biography and analysis, such as Prothero's (1996) biography of Henry Steel Olcott, might alienate a non-academic reader due to what may seem like tedious and lengthy theoretical or analytical tangents. Nadel's (1996) biography of Leonard Cohen is chronological and highly detailed, but, in my mind at least, boring—it lacked a narrative push for a fan or anyone only interested in what is otherwise a fascinating life story. Instead, this project is divided into three sections. The first section is the introduction which is largely made up of theory and methodology. The second section is the life story of Yellowman and it can be read independently, or as a case study for the third section, which contains four chapters of scholarly analysis. It is here in the third section that the academic reader will find the bulk of the literature review, an analysis of Yellowman's sexual ethics, theoretical implementation and my arguments.

I have used a loosely confined chronological narrative arc to tell the life story of Yellowman. That is to say that the overall life story is written basically from 1957 forward, but the narrative strays from this at times when I found a thematic motif trumped the need to tell the story in a straight forward manner. As well, I have tried to balance presentation of “on the ground” observations and interviews with historical data.

The dissertation is heavily weighted towards Yellowman's early life and career, particularly up until the late eighties. I see the early period as the most important for this study as it offers the much needed context with which to view Yellowman's career,

religious thought and sexual politics. As well, Yellowman's most prolific era was between 1981 and 1990. His releases tapered in the nineties and many of the albums that were issued then were compilations of early material. This is not to say that I ignore this period. I do, for instance, use many of his songs from the nineties to look at how his religious and racial identity has shifted as he has aged. I also have included many contemporary observations of my time spent with Yellowman, both on tour in the United States, Canada and in Jamaica. This keeps the project from being overly nostalgic for an earlier period and gives the reader a sense of who Yellowman is today.

## SECTION II: LIFE STORY

### CHAPTER 1

#### The Early Life of Winston “Yellowman” Foster

##### Lord, What an Ugly Baby

Me a goin' tell you me life story  
 Said when me did bad me mother disown me  
 Me mother said, “Lord, what an ugly baby”  
 Well one time, God, me never have no money  
 Me wear one pants have patchy patchy  
 Said Squidly, lord, and Welton Irie  
 Me walk down the street them a laugh after me  
 Some a walk some a talk some a dem<sup>32</sup> a scorn me  
 And some a dem a talk 'bout fly a follow me  
 And some of dem a say, “Him smell funny, eee”  
 But now me turn a man and turn a emcee  
 The girls dem a rush me  
 Nobody love me fe me deejay money<sup>33</sup>  
 —Yellowman, “Life Story”

Those who are familiar with Yellowman’s biographical sketch know that he grew up orphaned, in poverty and ostracized due to his colour, he is a black albino, what in Jamaica is referred to as a *dundus*<sup>34</sup> The career trajectory that he would later take and the slack lyrics that would eventually catapult him to fame were not the result of record

<sup>32</sup> Dem is patois for them, in patois there are no TH sounds. The TH in them becomes D. The use of the third person plural pronoun after a plural noun is a common Jamaican device that comes from the Niger-Congo family of languages (Adams 1991, 9,13)

<sup>33</sup> Squidly (Ranks) and Welton Irie are deejays and were contemporaries of Yellowman during this period. Yellowman pokes fun at other deejays in his songs, but almost always in a mock competitive manner, employing what Warner (1985, 13) calls “picong,” good natured heckling of rivals meant to provoke an equally biting response. For instance, in a 1983 interview he lists Welton Irie as one of the deejays he respects (Saunders 1983). Squidly Ranks is also brother to Peter Metro, a deejay with whom Yellowman had the hit “The Girl is Mine.”

<sup>34</sup> The word *dundus* and its cultural context are explicated in Section III Chapter 1

company research intent on providing an audience with a marketable product—though he was that. While slackness was used first and foremost by Yellowman to entertain audiences and add shock value to his performance, slackness also functions in several more complex ways in Yellowman’s music. In this section I offer a detailed description of Yellowman’s early life, based largely on interviews with him, but with the added input of fellow musicians, his band and manager, and biographic material found in the popular press. I provide this as contextual background to historicize his slackness in Jamaican social, religious, cultural, political and musical history. My focus here is on the antecedents to, and the development of, Yellowman’s views on sexuality, race, religion and masculinity. Because of this I spend most of this chapter on Yellowman’s early life (1957-1985) and only touch on his later life occasionally. This chapter traces Yellowman’s journey from orphanages to superstar reggae status and ends in the mid-eighties soon after Yellowman was diagnosed with terminal cancer, which he survived.<sup>35</sup>

### **Maxfield Park, February 2008**

When Yellowman returned to Maxfield Park Children’s Home in February 2008 it was unclear to me if he was welcomed or scorned yet again. Yellowman was taking me on a trip through Kingston, a sort of walk down memory lane of places he grew up, and while the reception he received was almost always positive at the stops we made in Trenchtown, Chisholm Avenue, Channel One Studio, Sonic Sounds Studio and Alpha Boys School, our initial welcome at the Maxfield Avenue orphanage was cold. Usually I

---

<sup>35</sup> Yellowman has been quoted by me and others as saying that he was given, variously, three months, two years or three years to live by doctors upon his first cancer diagnosis. His memory of the diagnosis, and his memory of exact dates, is enervated.

witnessed people in inner city Kingston see Yellowman step out of a car in front of one of these locations and do what I imagine impoverished people the world over instinctively do when a celebrity is in their midst, they ask for money Yellowman often obliges, even borrowing a few hundred Jamaican dollars from his driver to offer as hand-outs because he rarely carries cash himself He once said in 1983 that his ambition was to become a millionaire so that he could help out the poor (Saunders 1983) and he has told me that he has given large sums of money to the Maxfield orphanage I am not privy to the details of all Yellowman's charity work but during the time I spent with him I witnessed what I felt to be a genuine concern for what Rastafarians call "the sufferahs" This concern has increasingly been the subject of Yellowman's songs since the mid-eighties when he survived his first brush with mortality in the form of a cancerous tumor in his jaw It is also this concern that his many detractors ignore when they construct essentialized caricatures of him based on his slack material In their defence, Yellowman has created for himself a hypersexual identity, a sort of cross between a Jamaican Casanova that women across the island desire and pornographic autobiographer detailing his fantastical sexual escapades in language that is vulgar and offensive to mainstream moral sensibilities, at the same time inviting the listener to take the position of voyeur

It was this "king of slack"<sup>36</sup> persona that was on my mind as we walked around Maxfield Park searching for an employee named Miss Jean, a worker at the orphanage that Yellowman remembered fondly The first worker we approached stood behind a security gate at one of the children's residences and sucked her teeth when she saw Yellowman approach The children in her charge knew who the famous visitor was and,

---

<sup>36</sup> Yellowman has often been called the king of slackness by the press

as I witnessed children do all over Kingston that day, they flocked to him. The woman at the orphanage avoided eye contact when Yellowman asked her if Miss Jean was around. When she finally did look him in the eye it was to say spitefully, "It's not just you that special," and then coldly instructed us that we could find Miss Jean Soares at the "Jelly House," where infants and toddlers are kept.

Later, as we were leaving the orphanage, I asked Yellowman about this woman's demeanor. Did she treat him this way because she disapproved of his slackness? At the time I was intimidated by her and somewhat taken aback by her conduct so decided not to ask her myself. It turns out, however, there is another layer to this incident. It was Yellowman's opinion that this lady had incorrectly assumed that he had quickly forgotten his roots as he climbed out of the ghetto and gained fame and fortune. According to him, this is not so. In 1984, as Yellowman's international fame was peaking, he played a sold out show at Madison Square Gardens and donated a large sum of money from it to Maxfield Orphanage. But in what I would learn was typical Yellowman fashion he gave the money to his manager and never bothered to see if the donation made it to the orphanage. Poor management and a hands-off approach to his finances would eventually cause turmoil for him as he would blame one manager for losing two of his houses and getting him in the middle of a financial disagreement with the Salvation Army of Zimbabwe over a large advancement for a concert he never played. Regardless, as we walked around Kingston that day Yellowman vocalized his insistence that he had not forgotten his roots and that, unlike many reggae artists, he still stays connected to the ghettos that forged him.

## Life in the Ghetto

I Yellowman a never turn my back on you  
Cause living in the ghetto ain't easy  
—Yellowman, “Life in the Ghetto”

“The greatest praise given to successful blacks (especially sportsmen [*sic*] and entertainers) is that they remain loyal to the humble communities from which they sprang” (Alleyne 2005, 238) Staying in touch with the ghetto is an important part of the reciprocal relationship reggae stars have with their Jamaican fan base. Reggae is essentially ghetto music, it was born of the ghetto and is overwhelmingly thematically linked to the ghetto. An artist’s credibility with the dancehall “massive”—i.e. the fans—depends on their ability to stay connected with the fans’ concerns. Reggae is traditionally the music of the underclass, the ghetto dwellers, the sufferahs and, as such, an artist is rewarded for remembering their own roots in the ghetto with fan loyalty. Yellowman is mindful of this and actively facilitates his relationship with the ghetto by visiting old friends and neighbours in his former neighbourhood of Maxfield Park, or attending a fish fry in Franklin Town, or showing up on a Tuesday night at Bebo’s corner in Concrete Jungle to deejay on the mic alongside old sparring partner Squidly. He is also accessible to his fan base while out in public or after a show. I had witnessed Yellowman going back to Maxfield, Franklin Town, Concrete Jungle and Trenchtown and being treated like a king. He obviously enjoyed the attention and I suspected part of the reason for going there was to bask in that attention. He made a point of showing me that he had not forgotten his roots. I assumed this was also about credibility. Roots artists can gain “culture” credibility by showing their ties or upbringing in the ghetto and dancehall

artists get street credibility for showing that they ran/run with gangs/bad bwoys/rude bwoys

Alleyne's work on race and ethnicity in the Caribbean suggests that not keeping ties to ghetto could result in a successful person to be viewed as "letting down the race" or "playing white" (Ibid ) For Yellowman, it is imperative that in order to be taken seriously as a black man, as opposed to an albino or a white man, he must keep those ghetto connections In a society where race and ethnicity are powerful categories for identity construction and representation, Yellowman's lack of physical blackness is compensated for by his adoption of symbols of blackness In later chapters I will show how Rastafari, Afrocentricism and stereotypes of black sexuality work as three salient indicators of Yellowman's blackness Clearly, his ongoing maintenance of ghetto ties also functions to facilitate his representation in society as a black man

But there is a further reason to remain connected to the ghetto Artists like Yellowman are not respected uptown They live uptown but high society does not like them Yellow himself told me that several of his neighbours are prejudiced against him—he may think this is just because of his colour but it most likely also has to do with his reputation for slackness and his connections to both the ghetto and dancehall It is in the ghettos that reggae artists get the most respect and it is this respect that brings them down there When Yellowman brings a few bags of groceries to the ghetto he proves to the inhabitants that he is worthy of their respect It is cyclical, a give and take relationship They can boast about their ties to a superstar to their peers and Yellowman can boast about his ties to the ghetto thereby claiming authenticity and gaining credibility Bob Marley realized the importance of the ghetto ties as well I interviewed Yellowman's

former driver Willa, who told me that Marley used to visit him down in Bull Bay and when they would walk along the beach Bob would always stop and play marbles or football with the children. He was participating in that exchange—they gave him respect and credibility, he gave them the power to boast they knew the biggest star in Jamaica.<sup>37</sup> Most Jamaican artists need to maintain this important link with the ghetto because that is their main fan base. Conversely, a middle class artist such as Sean Paul can claim no ghetto credibility and predictably his fan base is middle, not lower class. This has been one of the longstanding critiques among reggae fans about Bob Marley's children. I once had a discussion with an avid Marley fan while I was a student at Bermuda College who felt the main difference between Bob Marley and Ziggy Marley was that the elder Marley grew up in the ghetto and had to struggle to build a music career while his son grew up in a house with a studio in it and all the opportunities being a Marley allowed. As such it is the ghetto pedigree of the artists that accounts for how fans judge their material.

In short, Yellowman returns to the ghetto for three reasons. First to command general respect among his fans. There is an authenticity associated with the ghetto for reggae musicians. If you want to present yourself as authentic you need to maintain that link. Second, the ghetto is a site where Yellowman can prove his blackness and dispel any doubts that he is "playing white." Third, he loves spotlight. Uptown people sometimes rebuke him but the downtown people crowd around him and treat him like the king. He goes there to feel like a star and be respected for his accomplishments. He still craves the attention and admiration of fans and wants to project a genuine love for the people, a love that he accurately believes has been reflected back to him over the course of his career.

---

<sup>37</sup> I am indebted to Willa for his views on how and why reggae artists maintain links with the ghetto.

As one of reggae's most recognized international stars, Yellowman is mindful of staying connected to his Jamaican fans. This is why, he told me, he chooses to live in Jamaica instead of in New York with his wife and children, he needs to stay close to the Kingston music industry, as that is the geographic heart of reggae. So for Yellowman, travelling downtown Kingston to tour me around orphanages, studios and neighbourhoods, was as much about publicly instantiating his continued ghetto credibility as it was facilitating my research on his life.

### **Blueberry Hill**

Yellowman remembers Maxfield Park Children's Home as a place where he was often teased by the other kids, suffered racial slurs and spent a lot of time by himself in the large mango tree outside the Jelly House. As he became older he used to sing to the younger children, his love of music an obvious source of enjoyment in an otherwise grossly underprivileged childhood. Miss Jean was one of the few workers at the orphanage Yellowman remembers taking an interest in him. Upon finding her at the Jelly House I had a difficult time getting her to talk to me about his childhood. She seemed happy to see him, apprehensive to see me, a foreign researcher with a digital recorder and a camera. Again I thought of Yellowman's controversial career and I wondered if Miss Jean was disappointed that the vulnerable child she helped raise and sent to a nearby Methodist church on Sundays for Christian instruction became the country's most infamous and lustfully obscene poet. I had heard stories that the nuns at Alpha Boys School, where Yellowman spent much of his teen years, abhorred his career choice and

refused to let him back on the property Yellowman himself downplays this and defends his career choices by saying that while the church and government were always against him, the “people dem,” meaning the general population, love him After much research I am inclined to think that this is true, at least so far as the “people dem” are confined to reggae fans There is a large contingent in Jamaica that argues that artists such as Yellowman produce music that is unacceptable in polite society, or worse, that dancehall has led to the general depravity of youth culture on the island which is now only concerned with sex, violence and material possessions Editorials and letters in the Jamaican papers are only one place to find this openly expressed Yellowman, on the other hand, sees nothing wrong with talking about sex, be it graphic, humorous or vulgar, in public One of his often repeated arguments is that, “we all come from sex so how can it be wrong?”

Dancehall itself has a stigma among older Jamaicans It is the music that invades their homes at night through the enormous speaker towers of mobile discotheques called “soundsystems” or, simply, “sounds,” offering open air dances in neighbourhoods across the country on a nightly basis <sup>38</sup> Out of fourteen nights I spent on Golding Avenue near the University of West Indies, Mona Campus in the winter of 2008, only two were free from not one but several competing soundsystems sending throbbing bass into the foothills of the Blue Mountains in east Kingston These soundsystems routinely played until a few hours before dawn Even armed with ear plugs, I could still clearly pick out many of the songs that filtered through my windows at night, as my field journal attests

---

<sup>38</sup> Soundsystems are mobile deejay businesses that play records for dances, sometimes called “lawns,” but have the added live element of a singer or talk-over artist, or what in Jamaica is called a deejay

*February 15, 2008, 10 30pm*

*I've spent the evening sitting out on the terrace rereading Carolyn Cooper's *Sound Clash* and listening to a soundsystem across the valley play everything from Admiral Bailey's "Punanny" to Ninja Man's "Border Clash"—very fitting indeed*

*February 16, 2008, 8 45pm*

*Tonight the soundsystem across the valley is playing oldies R&B night I think They slipped in a Madonna song and now are onto Kenny Roger's "Coward of the County" It's a little weird hearing Kenny Rogers with the selector cutting in every 20 seconds to reiterate Kenny's lyrics in patois Now they've moved onto the "Gambler" All this after I've been sitting on the veranda reading Cooper's "Lyrical Gun" where she argues for the fascination of Jamaican culture with western movies*

It is also dancehall that has embraced and propagated slackness in a way far greater than any previous generation's popular music I wondered if this is what Miss Jean meant when, in response to a question about whether she likes Yellowman's music, told me, "I only like 'Blueberry Hill' I'm a Western fan so I don't really go for the reggae" Yellowman's cover of "Blueberry Hill" was a reggae anomaly and a chart topper,<sup>39</sup> partly because of the ludic audacity of a deejay singing Fats Domino's R & B hit, and the latent sexual subtext that was magnified by the very fact the King of Slack was performing it The popularity of the song ballooned when Fats Domino himself was invited to Jamaica for a series of concerts alongside Yellowman The two artists shared a duet on the song and Yellowman proudly remembers that Domino paid him the enormous compliment of calling his version his personal favourite But this was also because the song came to represent a triumphant comeback for Yellowman after struggling to overcome cancer—the terrible disease came back several times—and is instructive for understanding the love and loyalty Jamaicans have for Yellowman His ability to overcome extreme adversity—first a horrendous childhood and then several life

---

<sup>39</sup> "Blueberry Hill" was the 9<sup>th</sup> most popular song of 1987 in Jamaica (Chang and Chen 1998, 228)

threatening cancers—has triggered the highest admiration from people around the world. Yellowman’s whole life has been about proving that he is not only up to the task at hand, but that he can surpass expectation. The culture and society he was born into labeled him worthless based on class and colour, and his rise to fame was accomplished by demonstrating his worth time and time again. Jamaicans of all stripes, even many of his detractors, began to appreciate and respect him for this.

Another important aspect of “Blueberry Hill” when looking at the life of Yellowman is the fact that he chose to sing, not deejay the song in his trademark talk-over style. This was a direct attempt to prove to fans that he was well after his surgery, but even more so, was a salvo to critics to signal that he had the ability to perform several styles of music very successfully. In an industry where artists are often lumped into general categories such as deejay or singer, or even confined to a tighter deejay typology such as “bad-man deejay” (songs about criminal activity), “slackness deejay” (songs that are sexually explicit), “girls dem deejay” (songs that focus on women and are particularly concerned with their sexuality) or “Rastafari deejay” (songs that espouse a Rastafarian worldview), Yellowman has attempted throughout his career to prove that he is an “all-rounder” (Hope 2006, 31-32).<sup>40</sup> An all-rounder is a deejay that does not confine his or her material to one of the above categories but sings diversely thematic material. That he can deejay either slackness or culture is the subject of several recurring lyrics. The fact that he is most often characterized as simply a slackness deejay means that his attempts have gone largely unnoticed by many outside of his immediate fan base. Within that fan

---

<sup>40</sup> Hope outlines this helpful deejay typology and situates Yellowman in both the “girls dem deejay” and the “slackness deejay” categories (Hope 2006, 31-32). Hope is correct that this is how Yellowman is perceived by most people and he has continually attempted to broaden this representation.

base, however, Yellowman is known as a diverse musician whose music can be slack or cultural, and when he tours to North America or Europe, he is often thought of more as a roots reggae performer than a slackness dancehall deejay I will return to this point later, and show how Yellowman sees himself as a second Bob Marley, taking the positive messages of roots reggae and Rastafari to the global audience

### **Me Mother Disown Me**

Yellowman only remembers seeing his mother once He recollects seeing a woman come to Maxfield Park and the staff telling him later that it was his mother He believes she told them his birthday and his father's name, but she never took the time to visit her son Why Pearl Golding and Ivan Foster decided not to raise their infant boy is a matter of speculation because no first-hand accounts of Yellowman's parents exist But it is accepted as fact by all who relay the story, including Yellowman himself, that he was orphaned because he was born a *dundus*, a black albino There were other albino children at Maxfield Park as it was a common occurrence to abandon albino children at that time in Jamaica (Carnegie 1996, 482) but we can surmise by the way he was abandoned that Pearl and Ivan at least wanted to ensure the infant's survival, and perhaps were still unsure in those early post-natal days if they would brave public contempt and keep him A birth certificate exists, as Yellowman found out when he applied for his first passport as an adult, so perhaps they took the trouble to register his birth with the authorities It is possible, however, that it was the orphanage, going on information from Pearl Golding, who registered the birth

Winston Foster was born January 15, 1957 at 54 Chisholm Avenue, in the Maxfield Park area of Kingston<sup>41</sup> It would be almost twenty years until Maxfield's Channel One Studio would find itself at the epicenter of a new style of reggae that would take Jamaica by storm Yellowman would be one of the deejays responsible In 1957 Pearl Golding lived at 54 Chisholm Avenue and gave birth at home to the child she would name Winston This address and name are on his birth certificate While Winston was born into a home in the familial sense of the word, that security would be fleeting He was found soon after his birth in a shopping bag, tucked into a garbage dumpster This may not be as thoughtless and inhumane as it first appears, Yellowman figures his mother put him in a place she knew someone would find him Truly, if his parents wanted the infant dead there are far more perilous places in Kingston they could have left him But find him someone did, after which he was taken to his new home, the orphanage on Maxfield Avenue at which he would spend the first ten years of his life

Since Yellowman has become famous, inevitably he has become the target for people claiming to be related to him In Jamaica and even England he has had people approach him telling him they are family members

Brent Hagerman You don't know any relatives?

Yellowman No, don't know grandparents

BH Have you had anybody that's come forward

Y Ya, people come to me but because I grow already I just say "ya ya ya " Even people come from England and say I'm your auntie I just say "ya ya ya "

---

<sup>41</sup> Alpha Boys School records say he was born on February 25, 1957 There are other discrepancies with the school records, as I will show later

BH So no family?

Y No family but mine

BH Do you just assume that you were abandoned because of your colour?

Y Ya man, I definitely know it was that Because you have other people like me they get abandoned also

### **The King of Kingston**

When me take up the mic and started to chat  
But tell you Yellowman him are de king of de crop  
Well anytime me chat me say de crowd haffi rock  
—Yellowman, “King of the Crop”

The house where Winston took his first breath is gone and the new building in its place is now home to the Jamaica Council Church of God Seventh Day Yellowman took me to this church though neither of us realized at the time that we had chosen their Sabbath, a Saturday, for the journey As our driver pulled the car into the lot we could hear singing through the open windows and saw some parishioners starting for their cars As we stepped out of the Honda taxi, a small group of female churchgoers recognized Yellowman and started toward us I was nervous about this encounter, here was Yellowman, a deejay that built his career largely on songs of a sexual nature, about to speak to what I assumed were conservative-minded Christians Would they, offended by his presence, drive us off the property? But unlike the orphanage there were no leering eyes and sucking teeth Instead, the ladies were overjoyed to see the celebrity

*February 15, 2008*

*I initially felt apprehensive about this since, as it was a Saturday, church was in progress. There were even people dressed in church clothes milling about the parking lot. We drove in and got out. I took some pictures and some of the ladies came up to Yellowman, obviously recognizing him. One of them said she knew him because she was from the area. They talked about where Leon, an old producer (of "Even Tide Fire") lived. The ladies were very happy – a bit star struck—to hang out with Yellowman and he, as everywhere, loved the attention. I took their picture with him, and they were quite happy about that. We hung out in the parking lot for a bit talking. Other people drove by and again I was surprised at their response. I thought this would be a place where people were against slackness and, especially after the experience at Maxfield, they might be put off by Yellowman, especially coming around on their Sabbath. But no, as people drove out of the parking lot they would shout "hey king Yellowman." Yellowman has told me repeatedly that the people love him here and that it is just the media and churches that criticize him. I am beginning to see that*

They were proud that he was one of them—from the same streets—and no matter what his songs contained, he was welcomed and treated as a star. A man leaving the church parking stuck his head out the car window and as he passed he greeted Yellowman with one of the salutations I had come to expect everywhere I travelled with him in Kingston: "Yes, King," or "King Yellow!" or simply, "King!" I learned an important lesson that day that validated Yellowman's claim that the "people dem" loved him. Here was a constituent I was sure would be offended by the King of Slack, yet they were proud that the King of Dancehall remembered his roots and returned to the streets where he was born. As a sign of the reciprocal respect between entertainer and his public, Yellowman is now welcomed as a king in a neighbourhood where he was once treated, literally, like refuse.

At Maxfield Park young Winston would be cared for by the state. No prospective parents were found for the albino boy and friends were few and far between. Yellowman tells stories of near adoptions and hopes for a normal life. An attendant at the home

wanted to adopt him but her other children said no, a doctor from Canada, Dr Box, talked of adopting the child but nothing ever came of it. He was used to being let down, overlooked, disappointed. When he was old enough he attended nearby Russell Primary School where a Mr Daley used to organize a “likkle” band with the school children. In class Winston would sit on the back bench, alone. “Nobody want to sit with me, no other children. And when I go to the canteen no other children want to sit with me,” he remembers. At school a pattern began that would not be broken until much later in life: he was physically abused for being different. In the canteen other kids made fun of him and took away his meal, when school let out for the holidays he was beat up because he had no one to protect him. Winston did not fight back, most likely seeing the futility in it. He started to exhibit violent behaviour in his teenage years, and he credits music for helping turn him away from what might have spiraled into a life of crime. By and large even his lyrics, with notable exceptions,<sup>42</sup> have largely steered clear of the type of gun violence that dancehall became inundated with in the late eighties and nineties. The experience made him tough, physically and spiritually. He endured what he calls “getting my ass kicked” and spat invectives to his attackers defiantly.

Though religion did not play a large part in Winston’s early life, he did start to encounter the ideologies of resistance found in Rastafari. It is during his years at Maxfield that Rastafari made its first impression on Winston. Vendors or “higglers” would come into the compound to sell fruit to the workers and orphans. A Rasta named

---

<sup>42</sup> Many of Yellowman’s songs decry violence (“Gunman,” “Duppy Or Gunman,” “Tourist Season”) or use violence in a joking manner (“Herbman Smuggling”). But a few songs, such as “Galong Galong Galong,” actually incite violence against groups such as politicians and homosexuals. These songs, and his alleged invectives against gays and lesbians in San Francisco in the early nineties, will be looked at in Section III Chapter 3.

Windy that sold oranges, was Winston's favourite. He used to give the children money and, unlike almost everyone Winston had met in his short life, Windy did not discriminate based on colour. "God sent him. I was alone and he gave me love. He was a father figure." This early encounter with a Rasta would have a significant impact on Winston, the powerful mixture of father figure, civility and dreadlocks would remain with him. During his formative years he remained a Rasta sympathizer. Having attended Methodist church services while at Maxfield, and later receiving Catholic instruction at Alpha Boys, Winston's understanding of God was couched in very Caribbean Christian terms. Rastafarians had a bad reputation in Jamaica at this time, long before Bob Marley and other dreadlocked Rasta messengers placated the country's fears that all "blackheart" men, as they were called, were thieves and crooks. Later, when Winston lived at Alpha Boys School, the nuns there did not allow Rastas on the grounds and students were forbidden to wear locks.<sup>43</sup> In those days, Winston recalls, "Dem would scare children and tell them Rastas would kill them."

His encounter with Windy allowed him on some juvenile level to critique the classist and racist narrative society had constructed around the Rastas, though it is doubtful a boy of his age would have thought of it in these terms at the time. But like them, Winston was an outsider and he was attracted to them because of this. And like them his fortunes on the island would soon rise.

---

<sup>43</sup> According to Yellowman. Sister Bernadette from Alpha Boys School is unsure about this.

## **The Rastafication of Reggae**

Whether he actively sought out Rastafarian music as he grew or not, as an avid listener to popular music Winston would absorb the Rastafarian ideas in many of the reggae songs that played on the soundsystems and around his neighbourhood in the seventies. Radio stations played very little Jamaican music during the fifties and early sixties and when they did start to play homegrown music it was always the variety that steered clear of radical ideologies, such as Millie Small's runaway hit, "My Boy Lollipop." By the early sixties, thanks to Edward Seaga, Clement Dodd, Chris Blackwell, Ernest Ranglin and others, Jamaican popular music started to develop a new style of its own. Whereas the bluebeat of Theophilus Beckford or Laural Aiken were highly derivative of American R & B, a new band called the Skatalites—with support from Studio One owner Clement "Coxone" Dodd—began Jamaica's first indigenous pop music: ska. Ska was derived from mento and R & B but had a heavy big band influence found especially in the dominance of horn melodies and improvisations. While the majority of ska tracks were either instrumental or filled with prosaic lyrics, some Rastafarian ideas started to seep in as Kingston's music scene became infiltrated by the Rastas in West Kingston ghettos.

Edward Seaga was foundational in steering the recording industry towards finding this new authentic Jamaican sound. Seaga was a talent developer and record producer in the early sixties with an interest in local culture, and music in particular. Seaga later became Leader of the Opposition in 1974, and Prime Minister from 1980-1989, a rather glowing example of how politics and the music industry in Jamaica share many links. As Minister of Culture he helped promote Jamaican music abroad. Both political parties,

Seaga's JLP and his arch rival, Michael Manley's PNP, used reggae in their campaigns to connect with the youth. In fact the melody for Yellowman's "Zunguzung" came from a Manley rally in the early eighties. Bob Marley lived a few doors down from the Prime Minister's official residence on Hope Road. Both Manley and Seaga knew the influence popular culture, and Rasta culture, had among the Jamaican youth and both went to great lengths to harness it. Now retired, Seaga writes a column for the *Jamaican Gleaner* and still writes and speaks on Jamaican music.

Reggae and Rastafari have a long symbiotic relationship, such that many reggae artists adopt Rastafarian style, names, dress, speech patterns, themes and ideological beliefs in their lyrics without actually becoming Rasta. Reggae culture has been so imbued with Rastafari—everything from the ubiquitous red, gold and green colours to pictures of Haile Selassie, that it is often difficult to discern which artist or which song would be considered authentically Rastafarian by a) the artist and b) other Rastas. Yellowman's acculturation into the reggae world would have included a basic understanding of Rastafari and its cultural manifestations. To put it another way, he would have absorbed much of Rastafari simply as a reggae fan. As Murrell states, "to feel the reggae beat is to think Rasta" (Murrell 1998, 9). Of this connection Hebdige says "reggae is the Rasta hymnal" (Hebdige 1974, 18) and uses early examples of Rastafari themes and the "internalization of God which marks the Rasta Creed" (Ibid, 24) in Jamaican ska such as Don Drummond and Rico Rodriguez (of the Skatalites) playing tunes like "Farther East," "Addis Ababa," "Tribute to Marcus Garvey" and "Reincarnation" to demonstrate this link (Ibid). In the late fifties when soundsystems wanted to work in Kingston they had to audition for Count Ossie and the Rasta Camps (Bradley 2001, 33). As well, use of Rasta

*burru* drumming in popular music dates back to one of the earliest recorded Jamaican hits (1960), “Oh Carolina” by the Folkes Brothers (Chang and Chen 1998, 86) Bradley calls this song an enormously influential “piece of cultural legislation” because it marks the beginning of a bond between the Jamaican music industry and Rastafari that is still in existence (Bradley 2001, 16) and one that has had powerful global ramifications as it is the beginning of what has resulted in the transnational cultural forms of reggae and the Rastafarian religion

It was not until the late sixties, after the advent of reggae, that the terms “Rasta” and “reggae” became almost synonymous for many fans of the music Hebdige calls this the Africanisation or Rastafication of reggae—“taking reggae back to Africa” (Hebdige 1974, 26) Jones (1988, 42) and Gilroy (1982, 299) both single out Bob Marley and the Wailers as the penultimate evangelists for Rastafari in the U K and, indeed, around the world While the movie *The Harder They Come* (1972) starring Jamaican singer Jimmy Cliff introduced the world to reggae, Marley was the first to capitalize on its success Jones argues that the “defiance and rebellion” in the Wailers’ first two international albums, *Catch a Fire* and *Burnin’*, presented a “compulsive unity of populist, anti-imperialist and Rasta themes” (Jones 1988, 42) Subsequent tours of the U K by the Wailers popularized both reggae and Rastafari among blacks and whites and the Wailers’ enormous cross-over appeal into white markets would have many later argue that Marley and his version of Rastafari came to represent reggae music for many people globally (Bradley 2001, 397) <sup>44</sup>

---

<sup>44</sup> Marley was a member of the Twelve Tribes of Israel, a moderate Rastafarian “house” with membership drawn from the lower and middle classes Houses, or organized groups, of Rastas include the Twelve Tribes

Marley's avid Rastafari stance was, by this time, no anomaly in reggae music. Reggae became increasingly politicized in the sixties and seventies as Rastafari had a growing effect on the music (Cashmore 1983, 245). With more and more reggae artists sympathizing with Rastafari, and a growing number of producers willing to let them do it on record, the Jamaican music industry zealously embraced Rastafari (Bradley 2001, 466) and reggae started to be divided into what is variously called on the one hand "dread," "roots and culture," "roots" or "conscious" reggae, and on the other hand "pop," "slack" reggae and "lover's rock." Roots or conscious reggae is generally defined as reggae that is musically harder or "heavier" (Gilroy 1982, 297-8, Hebdige 1974, 26), usually meaning more prominence is given to the bass and drums over the melody instruments.<sup>45</sup> It is also delineated by lyrical sentiment that sympathizes with the Rastafari movement, often resulting in "reality" lyrics to use dub poet Linton Kwesi Johnson's term, and concerned with religion—particularly employing biblical allusions, (Hebdige 1974, 39) equal rights, justice and Ethiopianism.

Many commentators have also linked reggae musically with Rastafari. With the Rastafarian-led cultural awakening of the seventies, reggae music adopted Rastafarian Nyabinghi drumming and chanting.

A large portion of the reggae produced during this period, including local covers of North American hit songs, displayed influences from Rasta music. The *nyabinghi* lead drum, the repeater, was no regularly featured on pop records—sometimes even those that made no reference to Rastafarian themes, such as love songs. Studio musicians sometimes transferred *nyabinghi*-derived rhythms, originally played on drums, to other instruments such as organ, piano, and guitar (Manuel

---

of Israel, Nyabinghi and Bobo Ashanti

<sup>45</sup> This was especially true as the rhythm section of Sly (Dunbar) and Robbie (Shakespeare) started to control the evolution of reggae in the mid-seventies from Channel One studio. In an effort to make the music more "militant" and heavy they started to produce records with mixes that accentuated bass and drums over everything else (Dunbar 2006). I look at this in more detail in Section III Chapter 2.

1995, 166)

Roots reggae is also subversive stylistically it eschews mainstream pop sensibilities of melody in favour of a prominent repetitive bass (Hebdige 1974, 29) and emphasizes the rhythm section (bass, drums, organ, guitar) over solo instruments Whereas in western popular music melody is dominant, in some styles of roots reggae, such as dub, it is not uncommon to reduce the music to just bass and drums, or at times even dissolve it into sonic washes of reverb and echo Musically reggae emphasizes the opposite beat to western pop<sup>46</sup> It also uses vernacular speech instead of “proper” colonial English, was disseminated largely through private soundsystem parties or blues dances, and was often recorded by independent producers like Lee Perry or Augustus Pablo renting studio time from established, non-Rasta studio owners In addition, roots reggae was played by the Rasta counterculture who’s choice of fashion revolved around their connection with Africa (including dreadlocks, the red, gold and green of the Ethiopian flag, African military regalia, pictures of Haile Selassie), itself an affront to the colonial (and post-colonial) powers of the day

Suffice it to say that by the mid-seventies roots reggae and pop reggae were two separate genres, the former being represented by Rastas such as Burning Spear, Big Youth, U-Roy, Junior Murvin, Max Romeo, Gregory Isaacs, Bob Marley and Dennis Brown<sup>47</sup> As Yellowman began to become aware of reggae in the late sixties and

---

<sup>46</sup> Common beat patterns for rock music stress the downbeat (the first and third beats of a 4/4 bar) but reggae often omits the downbeat (as in the drumming style known as “one drop”) and stresses the upbeat (the second and fourth beats)

<sup>47</sup> Jones argues that roots acts provided audiences with a continued source of “cultural nourishment and political education” and contributed “immeasurably” to the popularity and spread of Rastafari as an “international social movement” (Jones 1988, 43)

seventies, these are the ideologies he would be met with

### **Swift-Purcell, 1967**

For Winston Foster, who had grown up in an orphanage in inner city Kingston and had seen all his fellow orphans adopted while he remained ignored, life was also about to go in a new direction. In 1967 at age 10 he would exchange the simmering congestion and heat of Kingston for life in the country as he would be moved from Maxfield Park to Swift-Purcell Industrial School and Home for Boys in Belfield, in the parish of St. Mary.

As an adolescent in St. Mary, Winston was protected from ghetto life in downtown Kingston, but remained at the mercy of the state. At Swift Purcell Winston remembers always singing. His favourite music was the burgeoning roots reggae movement, plus American R&B. Winston would go on long field trips with the school to Port Royal, Negril, and the JBC television station in Kingston. He would also suffer from sun exposure on regular trips to the beach at Robins Bay or Annotto Bay. He liked going to the ocean to swim but had to cover his skin the best he could to avoid onlookers making fun of him, choosing to wear clothes in the water instead of a bathing suit. When he did expose his skin to the sun he would suffer burns because "in those times we never had no lotion." When we discussed this in his kitchen in 2009 he pulled up his sleeves to show me the difference in the skin between his lower arms and his upper arms. The upper skin was clear and smooth but the lower arms were rough and had some sores. Now, some 40 years later, Yellowman feels no need to hide his skin in public. Years of singing about his own desirability have convinced him of his own physical beauty. When

I have accompanied him in the streets in Kingston he routinely wears short pants—themselves a rarity among Jamaican men—and short-sleeved shirts, and on stage he often dons sleeveless basketball shirts. People who are not aware of who he is stare, some children still giggle. Yellowman ignores oglers and refuses to cover up in public. He now wears his yellow skin as a badge of honour. In part, it is what helped him gain recognition.

Despite enjoyable field trips Winston's life did not improve at Swift-Purcell. He was now subjected to pranks at the hands of his adolescent classmates on top of constant verbal abuse. The first signs of his violent behaviour started to show.

Yellowman: We used to go to the bushes to do work, like clean up, like at a farm. Swift-Purcell had a banana farm and a cane farm. I remember one time all the boys got together and said "let us go to the Banana Walk." And then a group of guys—I thought they were friends—tied me up to a coconut tree and leave me there. I was there overnight and the next day when they do a head count, and they said, "Where is Winston, where's white man?" Some other guys must have pointed out the group of guys I was with, so they start flog them and they say I in the Coconut Bush. When they go there I was still tied to the tree.

When Winston was freed from the tree he was livid. He sought out the boys and wanted to kill them. He hit one of them with a piece of wood and knocked him out but the rest of the group ran to the headmaster. This incident crushed him, he realized that the friends he thought he had finally gained were no different than the other boys he knew at Maxfield. He was alone in a crowded school and the rest of the boys refused to go anywhere or do anything with him. The teachers, who had not realized the extent of his ostracism until the coconut tree incident, acted accordingly and stopped sending him to do chores with the other boys.

Yellowman The teachers start to watch out for me more because of this incident and go out to the Board of the School The Headmaster gave orders to watch and he tell them never let this get outta hand They felt like I was going to get very violent

But it was too much for the preteen to take Almost a week after this humiliation he ran away from Swift-Purcell with just the clothes on his back, he had no other belongings He spent between three and five days on the road alone surviving off bananas, soursop, chocolate (fruit from the cacao tree), and other food he could find growing freely His only mode of transportation was walking and he stayed off the main roads during the day because he would be instantly recognizable to anyone searching for a runaway albino He slept under trees, hidden from view and when people did see him they would call out derisions like, “Hey, look at the dundus bwoy,” or “Hey, backra master, whey you doing so? Whey you come from?”<sup>48</sup> Keeping to himself, Winston ignored the taunts and kept walking, through High Gate and Robin’s Bay, all the way to Annotto Bay on the north coast The teachers at Swift-Purcell had alerted the authorities when he was discovered missing, and even though he was cautious, Winston’s time on the lam would be short “When I was in Annotto Bay I saw a police car pull up and they grab me and take me back to Swift-Purcell And then I get punished ”

Winston remained at Swift-Purcell for a total of four years and then was again transferred to another institution for unwanted children This time it was to Alpha Boys School back in Kingston The year was 1971 <sup>49</sup>

---

<sup>48</sup> *Backra* or *buckra* is derived from an Ibo word meaning “white man” (Cassidy 2002, 18) *Whey*, in this usage, is patois for “what” or “where ”

<sup>49</sup> Alpha records state that Yellowman began attending Alpha in 1967 and moved to live there in 1969 from Maxfield Park orphanage This timeline leaves no room for his tenure at Swift-Purcell

## **CHAPTER 2**

### **A History of Slackness in Caribbean Music**

While ska, rocksteady and early reggae are remembered in the history books as the sound of Jamaica in the sixties, Winston was enthralled by another style of music at this time, one that was not even Jamaican, Trinidadian calypso. As the decade waned Winston's musical tastes still included American black music alongside Jamaican popular hits, but like youths all over the Caribbean one of his favourite singers was Slinger Francisco, better known as Mighty Sparrow. Calypso, like Jamaica's mento, was still popular in Jamaica, Winston would have grown up hearing calypso and mento but by the early sixties it was no longer the music of the youth. By the seventies calypso and mento both would begin to be relegated to tourist centres on the north coast, though both maintained staunch fans, especially among older music listeners. Many of the men that would later become reggae's greatest contributors, such as Wailers bassist Aston "Familyman" Barrett, would spend time playing calypso for tourists in hotels or even on cruise ships to pay the bills.

But for Winston, in the mid-sixties calypso was anything but tourist music. For him Sparrow, the king of calypso, was a breath of fresh air away from the trials of life as an orphan and albino. Sparrow's use of double entendre, humour and veiled sexuality had a significant impact on Winston as he slowly developed into a songwriter himself. In Sparrow Winston found an early mentor. Sparrow's wordplay was second to none, his timing impeccable, his subject material varied and timely, his humour universal, his popularity massive and his creativity boundless—all skills that were already valued in

Jamaican music and would increase in cultural currency with the shift to dancehall in the seventies. In the mid-sixties, Sparrow was the undisputed top calypsonian and had been so since the mid-fifties. Sparrow was everything Winston desired to be: popular, skilled, respected, rich, independent. While it seemed unlikely at the time, a decade later he would go on to achieve just that. As Yellowman, Winston adopted Sparrow's love of language, particularly slackness, and covered Sparrow songs such as "Big Bamboo" and even shared a concert at Madison Square Gardens with him in the eighties.

The case of calypso is instrumental in understanding slackness in dancehall, for slackness is not ahistorical, it did not arrive a priori out of Yellowman's mouth in 1979 and, despite some critics' views, it was not invented by Jamaican dancehall culture. I turn now to a discussion of the history of slackness in Caribbean music to give much needed background to the style that Yellowman came to embody in the eighties.

Slackness is not unique to dancehall or, in fact, to Jamaica. It is rather an instantiated, if not controversial, institution throughout the Caribbean and can be traced back to songs from slavery era (Warner 1985/1997) and the sea shanties brought to the Caribbean by British sailors and Irish indentured workers (Nye 2007).<sup>50</sup> Lusty double entendre and licentious were no strangers to the British of antiquity, Shakespeare, for many the epitome of high British culture, was a very slack playwright by Jamaican standards. Shakespeare's work was filled with vulgar puns on all manner of sexual topics such as genitalia, sodomy, venereal disease, masturbation, semen, same sex copulation and prostitution. Pauline Kiernan (2007), in her book *Filthy Shakespeare: Shakespeare's Most Outrageous Sexual Puns*, argues that Shakespeare's audience would have

---

<sup>50</sup> In Section III Chapter 3 I look further into British antecedents to Caribbean slackness.

understood these puns, even though contemporary audiences are largely in the dark regarding their original meaning. More than this, the bard's popularity was in part due to his slackness, even in sixteenth century England sex sold. And in a society where brothels were licensed by the Bishop of Winchester and stood in the same district as the theatres, plays spoke openly about sex and Shakespeare and his contemporaries gave their male and female characters lines about "fucking, pricks, cunts, ejaculation and buggery" (Kiernan 2007, 16, 26)

Given the popularity and high regard of Shakespeare in British literature, Calypsonian Attila the Hun found it strange that kaiso or calypso was censored for bawdy content at the same time as European playwrights and authors were heralded as high culture, even though their content was often smutty. He made this point in a 1938 recording called "The Banning of Records"

To say these songs are sacrilegious, obscene or profane  
Is nothing but a lie and a burning shame  
If kaiso is indecent then I must insist  
That so is Shakespeare's "Venus and Adonis"

Boccaccio's tales and Voltaire's *Candide*  
*The Martyrdom of Man* by Winwood Reade  
But o'er these authors they make no fuss  
But want to take advantage of us (quoted in Eldridge 2005)<sup>51</sup>

Attila the Hun's song speaks volumes about the Eurocentric attitudes towards African diasporic culture where salaciousness was equated with African immorality and animalistic tendencies. Victorian morals and Puritan austerity seem to have dominated the

---

<sup>51</sup> Elsewhere the last line is transcribed as "they want to take our culture from us" (Rohlehr 1990, 299)

managing of sexuality in the colonies, but those authorities turned a blind eye to examples of slackness from Europe's own past. Attila the Hun may have smiled when, several years later, Jamaican dancehall fans criticized the same inconsistency regarding socially sanctioned displays of carnality at the annual calypso and soca Carnival while slackness in dancehall was routinely demeaned.

Dancehall shares its slack heritage not only with its immediate Jamaican forebears—reggae, ska, mento—but also with other musics of the Caribbean, such as Antiguan benna and the Trinidadian calypso. Until reggae's popularity rose in the seventies calypso was the most popular music form in the English speaking Caribbean (White 1982, 31)<sup>52</sup> While the Caribbean is marked by diversity in language, geography and ethnicity, Manuel (1995) argues that there is a basic set of sociomusical attributes shared by the region. These include “the presence of an Afro-Caribbean cultural common denominator, a history of musical syncretization, the strength of oral traditions, the emergence of the lower-class, African-influenced work songs, religious musics, [and] Carnival traditions” and songs that “display an uninhibited delight in sexuality” (Manuel 1995, 233, 237). While many of these attributes are looked at elsewhere in this dissertation, it is the uninhibited sexuality that I want to concentrate on here. Typically, these inhibitions have been expressed using double entendre and humorous puns meant to share their meaning with their audience semi-covertly, in a manner appearing inoffensive to mainstream society so as to limit sanctions against the artists. The intended audience shares in the joke, as well as appreciates the use of the linguistic devices and the overall

---

<sup>52</sup> White points out that Jamaicans would have heard and been influenced by music from around the Caribbean in the fifties, and says that nightclub patrons in Kingston would have been familiar with the Cuban habanera, the Dominican merengue, the Argentinean tango and, of course, Trinidadian calypso (White 1982, 31)

high jinks of the act. The public reacts approvingly to a dirty calypso because it feels it is “a piece of smut cleverly put over” (Warner 1985, 128). Caribbean song is oral tradition and as such Caribbean wordsmiths and their audiences value language and performance highly. The use of colloquialisms, puns, heckling, *picong*,<sup>53</sup> and double entendre in calypsos reflects this love of language and “captures that which is close to the very heart of the society” (Warner 1985, 32).

As the top calypso singer, Sparrow’s repertoire included many songs filled with double entendre, thinly veiled narratives about sexual exploits, wanton women and male prowess. Calypsonians were adept at making slack themes sound innocuous and as a result calypso and mento enjoyed a certain respectability in Jamaican society that reggae and dancehall lacked. Yellowman calls calypso uptown music, whereas the music he performed was street music.

Yellowman [Sparrow] wasn’t gross like me, because I was very gross. If Sparrow say “sex,” I say “fuck.” And if Sparrow say “pussy,” I say “vagina.” I was very blunt.

Yellowman employed double entendre in his music to a high degree, but was also known for wiping away all pretense and talking about sex as sex. This shocked polite society, of course, but also broke a cultural tradition of not using plain talk in the interest of maintaining privacy (Sobo 1993). This could be one reason why Yellowman was so effective as an agitator in dancehall, he broke through the unwritten code that sexuality must be hidden beneath double entendre.

---

<sup>53</sup> Derived from the French “*piquant*” (stinging, insulting), *picong* refers to insults traded between calypsonians (Warner 1985, 14).

Yellowman remembers suggestive calypso on the radio, even though its subject matter was at times vulgar. Everybody knew it was slack but since it used polite, or masked language, it was deemed acceptable. Today Yellowman finds the differing attitudes toward sexuality in calypso and in dancehall to be unfair. Both are slack, he argues, yet dancehall has been continually demonized while calypso gets away with blatant sexuality.

Winston loved the way Sparrow disguised sex in metaphor and found the titillating subject material humorous. When calypsonians wanted to sing about the male phallus they used euphemisms such as “golden sword,” “wood,” “coil,” “bamboo,” “ram,” “banana,” “water hose,” “stick,” “pogo stick,” “rod of correction,” “drum stick,” “key,” or “blade.” A vagina could be referred to as a “garden,” “saltfish,” “pussy,” “pumpkin” or invoked with numerous automobile images such as “gearbox.” Popular actions for a male enacting sex upon a female included “flooding,” “wetting” or “eating” (Warner 1985, 108). In “Congo Man,” for instance, the Mighty Sparrow’s humour and food metaphors allow him to cross into forbidden territory of race and sexuality. Borrowing western society’s trope of the African cannibal, Sparrow cooks up a white female intruder but insists he “never eat a white meat yet.”

The calypso master’s true meaning is never far from the surface of his songs. While Sparrow may appear to be talking about seafood, the song “Saltfish” speaks of the pleasures of a woman’s vagina. In the “Village Ram” it is not livestock that is the song’s subject but the calypsonian’s claims that he has the power to sexually satisfy any woman. Likewise the “Big Bamboo” is not about forestry products but rather a boastful calypso about the size and strength of the singer’s penis. And in “Sell the Pussy” the song’s

narrator insists that his girlfriend's cat should be sold to put food on the table in a humorous, if not problematic, tale of pimping one's lover for money Sparrow's slackness was not an anomaly in either calypso or other Caribbean musics Both Jamaica's mento and Antigua's benna, for example, were popular forms that, like their Trinidadian counterpart, have a rich tradition of speaking about sexuality using humour, double entendre and creolized language

This is not to say that mainstream society did not know what the songs were about, or were unaffected by them The wordplay is often transparent so that, for instance, a general audience knows what Lord Kitchener is referring to when he says "climbing Mount Olga," what Baldhead Growler means when he speaks of his big sausage, or what Mighty Sparrow is talking about in "Ah Fraid Pussy Bite Me" Another examples include Sparrow's "Sparrow Water de Garden," "Bendwood Dick," "Jook for Jook," "Meh No is 69" and "Leggo Me Stick" Lord Kitchener's "Little Drummer Boy," which was later used as the basis for a slack Jamaican song by both Prince Buster and Lee Perry Here "drumming" is a euphemism for sex, and Kitchener recounts how many ladies are impressed with his skill at drumming He adds a laugh after the word to relate to the listener the double meaning of the song Other devices used by calypsonians for this purpose are gestures of the face and body (Ibid, 38) Trinidadians frequently complained about vulgar calypsos and did not tolerate excessive slackness or gratuitous performances with suggestive body movements (Ibid, 129)

The Trinidadian middle classes had for decades waged a quixotic campaign to launder calypso and other carnival practices of such embarrassing tendencies, and calypsonians had repeatedly mounted spirited defenses of the redeeming social merits of their art (Eldridge 2005, paragraph 6)

In an essay on the calypso as Caribbean literature, Hill contends that a “great calypso” must be both timely and timeless and must have moral merit with the composer possessing insight into understanding or improving the human condition. It is clear from his comments that most of the sexual-themed calypsos lack this, and therefore lack merit: “calypsos have a moral quality when they are genuinely conceived rather than the product of some rhymester alien to the milieu who composes salacious ditties for the pop record market” (Hill 1974, 296)<sup>54</sup>. All of Hill’s examples of great calypsos omit slackness: “Death is Compulsory” by Lord Kitchener, “The Human Race” by Lord Pretender, “Federation” by Mighty Sparrow, and “Black is Beautiful” by the Mighty Duke. It seems then, that for Hill, laundering the calypsos here is important, even though many of the “salacious ditties for the pop record market” were both timely and timeless.

The calypsonian was alternatively lauded and denounced in Trinidad for their irreverence in song and hedonistic lifestyle (Manuel 188). As a further indication of their tension with mainstream society, calypsonians had their songs heavily censored, particularly in the thirties:

Any song criticizing the state or dealing with Afro-Trinidadian culture or religion was subject, however unpredictably, to banning. Calypsonians were required to submit their lyrics to censorship offices before singing them, and policemen were posted in tents to monitor performances. Tents hosting objectionable songs could be shut down and singers’ licenses revoked. Shipments of allegedly subversive records pressed in New York were dumped in the sea. (Manuel 1995, 190)

Songs with a sexual subtext were also censored and banned by radio (Warner 1985, 86).

Calypsonians were regarded by Christians as singing the devil’s music and for years radio

---

<sup>54</sup> In James T. Livingston, *Caribbean Rhythms: The Emerging English Literature of the West Indies*, Washington Square Press, New York, 1974, 286-297.

would not play any calypsos on air during lent (Ibid , 86) Calypso singing was recognized as a lower class occupation, and it was the music of the masses (Rohlehr 1970, 87) Yet Mighty Sparrow, who is the most popular and successful calypso performer since the fifties (McDaniel 1998, 963, Warner 1985, 5) and who Rohlehr calls “the calypso laureate of the West Indies” (Rohlehr 1970, 89), had several risqué songs and yet remained at the top of the genre

The way around outright vulgarity or open embarrassment is the use of double entendre, stretched to the very furthest ends of the calypsonian’s fertile imagination In its milder form, this device allows the calypso to escape the self-imposed censorship of the radio stations, in its more vicious form, it parallels the very vulgarity or eroticism it is seeking to mask (Warner 1985, 129)

Warner’s typology of calypso divides the genre into three categories 1) political and social commentary, 2) anecdotes, and, 3) sexually oriented material that establishes male machismo at the expense of the feminine All three types link their genealogy to the satirical social commentary of slave-era songs Songs were used by enslaved Africans for ridiculing each other and their masters These early songs, like later calypsos and dancehall tracks, were improvised and they foreshadowed the political commentary of calypso and reggae by employing flattery and satire (Ibid , 9) And by couching their criticisms of the elite class in double entendre, wordplay and creolized language (originally French Creole and later English Creole in Trinidad) only select members of their audience—fellow slaves—understood their meaning (Ibid ) “The calypsonian uses a certain range of images that the public immediately recognizes as capable of conveying the double meaning” (Ibid , 129) This demonstrates Gilroy’s (1993) “double consciousness” thesis, by being in a privileged liminal space between insider and outsider

this allowed the enslaved Africans to critique oppressive societal structures. In this way the use of double language acted as a strategy to veil criticism of the elites and protected the singers from serious repercussions for contesting the established hegemonic rule. For Lovelace, the early sexually charged calypsos of the slavery era allowed a slave to please his master and peers at the same time. He “must keep his meaning secret not because it is so multidimensional but because if he didn’t he would expose himself” (Lovelace 1978, 42). In modern times this strategy is still in effect. Lovelace shows how the wisdom of the double entendre has continued today: “we have learnt too well from the calypsonians that when we do say one thing it is safer if it appears to sound like another (Ibid.)” Rohlehr argues that this technique is derived from the African custom of permissive criticism of one’s leader during a set aside time and context through a song or story (Rohlehr 1990, 2) <sup>55</sup>

We can see the links between Yellowman’s slack material and risqué calypso in several of the themes both take up: boasting about sexual prowess and physical endowments, espousing a breeding farm approach to male-female relationships, instantiating male ego through boasting about the number of sexual partners, songs about paternity, either boasting about it or denying it, songs about a sexual appetite so ravenous that the singer would be satisfied having sex with any woman, liberal use of phallic symbols, and, of course, double entendre.

---

<sup>55</sup> Also see Burton 1997, 187-8

## **Antiguan Calypso and Benna**

While Trinidad is the natal home of the calypso, other islands created their own forms as well. In Antigua contemporary calypsos take their style and formula from influential Grenadian-Trinidadian calypsonian Mighty Sparrow but early Antiguan calypso derives from the satirical folk style called benna or bennah, that was sung in a call and response method between leader and audience (McDaniel 1998, 800). In turn, benna is influenced by “le vrai” (the truth) songs of enslaved Africans that were performed in secret, celebrated their African culture (drumming, dance, song) and mocked their masters (Nicholson 2005). Nicholson traces the word benna to mean “song-dance” and says it is African in origin. This style of music was introduced post-slavery.

Benna shares the tradition of slackness with other Caribbean musics and Nicholson points out that “Benna dealt with the bawdy, the scandalous, the cruel and occasionally the humorous” (Ibid). Like calypso, benna functioned as the community’s news source with song lyrics constructed from topical material. John “Quarkoo” Thomas became the most well-known benna singer during the forties and fifties and his material, extemporaneously written, drew on contemporaneous events such as “the gruesome murders and courthouse trials to scandalous husband/wife infidelities of the upper and middle classes in the society” (Ibid). Quarkoo was a street performer and vendor of printed songs and published scandalous texts, the lyrics of one such song, “Cocoatea” caused his arrest and imprisonment by the authorities. This satirical benna “broadcast the news that the daughter of a high-placed citizen had become pregnant while living in a convent” (McDaniel 1998, 800). Nicholson points to the use of “double language, metaphors and folklore” in Antiguan music as a method to protect it from censorship by

the authorities (Nicholson 2005)

### **Jamaican Mento**

In 1951 Stanley Motta became the first producer in Jamaica when he opened a studio and started recording mento artists—previous to this no indigenous recordings of Jamaican music existed (Barrow and Coote 2004) Mento itself was a syncretic amalgam of European and African musics and used instrumentation from both cultures fiddle, flute, clarinet, saxophone and guitar from the former, and African-based instruments such as banjo, drums and rhumba box During the slavery era, music traditions from Africa were refashioned by slaves as they came into contact with European music via sailors, soldiers and planters Poor whites from Ireland, Scotland and England worked as bookkeepers and indentured servants in Jamaica and would have influenced the cross cultural musical pollination The music traditions they brought with them such as the Morris and Merry-Andrew dances, or celtic and British folk music, would have been seen and heard by slaves (White 1982, 28) Whylie calls mento the “product of what had started in the seventeenth century, with the dynamic collision of the cultures of Europe and Africa,” and says it was the first dance to enjoy national popularity (Wylie quoted in Senior 2003, 315)

Mento was the popular music of its day but its appeal faded with the advent of American big band music in the years after World War II, American R & B in the fifties and bluebeat and ska in the sixties Mento became relegated to tourism music, and today the most visible mento bands are at hotels or on cruise ships (Senior 2003, 314) The

music had a tremendous impact on Jamaican popular music, however, and many subsequent Jamaican artists employed themes, lyrics, melodies and rhythms from the mento era in their songs

The first Jamaican singer to record mento was Louise Bennett, or “Miss Lou,” who cut songs for Melodisc in 1950, but that was in London. By the time Jamaicans started recording mento in Jamaica, the calypso craze had already swept the United States, and as early as 1912 Trinidadian calypsonians were being recorded by American record labels. The Andrews Sisters’ song “Rum and Coca Cola” sold upwards of seven million copies in 1945 and when Harry Belafonte—a Jamaican—released an LP titled *Calypso* in 1956 it became the first album to sell more than one million copies (Barrow and Coote 2004). The widespread popularity of calypso put pressure on Jamaican mento bands to adopt the title calypsonian if they wanted to sell records outside Jamaica. International record companies were busy promoting “island music” and calypso became the de facto term for all music from the English Caribbean (White 1982, 32). Motta’s records subsequently carried the name calypso for many songs and artists. Many mento musicians found work in tourist venues by advertising their music as calypso, even though it was really mento (Manuel 1995, 155). Lord Flea, for instance was quoted in 1957 as saying, “if the tourist want calypso, that’s what we sell them” (in Barrow and Coote 2004).

It is telling that two of Yellowman’s musical heroes growing up were men who appreciated a good slack tune. Besides the Mighty Sparrow Wintson also loved to listen to Jamaican mento-reggae musician Stanley Beckford. Beckford, recording with bands the Starlights or Stanley and the Turbines, had his biggest hit in the early seventies with

“Soldering,” a euphemism for sex. The fact that “Soldering” got airplay even surprised its author, though it was eventually banned from Jamaica radio stations (Forge 1993)<sup>56</sup>

Yellowman “Soldering” used to play on the radio, Stanley and the Turbines (sings) “Soldering a wha de young gal want ” That was a mento

Brent Hagerman Does soldering mean sex?

Y Ya, it sex, but the way they put it, it don’t sound like sex, you understand? But soldering means sex

Calypso and mento songs enjoyed airplay because they stayed away from blatant sexuality. They used insinuation so that on the surface the song seemed clean. This is how Marley, for instance, could sing about sex in songs like “Stir it Up” but not be considered slack.

Yellowman In those days, if you say ‘damn’ in a record they wouldn’t play it on the radio, you understand? I couldn’t say ‘whine’ in a record

Mento is often considered a Jamaican variant of calypso and while the terms were interchangeable in Jamaica in the fifties, and the words calypso or calypsonian was used extensively in the band names of mento acts as well as their song titles, its origins are mainly Jamaican folk music. Before the fifties mento was the closest thing to an indigenous popular music Jamaica had (Manuel 1995, 153). It is derived chiefly from rural digging songs or ring-play songs and when mento moved into the studio arena in the fifties it was an urbanized form of the genre which evolved out of the club culture of Kingston (Ibid, 155). It was this new urban mento that Manuel suggests had an increased

---

<sup>56</sup> Beckford’s obituary in *The Guardian* corroborates this (Katz 2007)

emphasis on suggestive lyrics, an innovation to accompany the “pelvic-centred dance movements” of mento’s dancers, which had become more pronounced and erotic (Ibid ) “On Saturday nights in Kingston, popular dance bands would play music that positively encouraged quite lascivious dancing that was far removed from the restrained, traditional rural music” (Barrow and Coote 2004) It seems that for mento the erotic element was focused on the dance performances that accompanied the music and less on the lyrics The dance was viewed as “vulgar and indecent, with its pelvic movement and intimate body contact (called ‘rent-a-tile’)” (Senior 2003, 315) A typical foreign description of mento at the time is found in a 1950 *Dictionary of Folklore* “An erotic Jamaican dance Its music is slower and more voluptuous than that of the rumba The woman tantalizes her partner into a frenzy with seductive rolling of the haunches and belly and works herself into a state of autointoxication” (*Dictionary of Folklore*, quoted in Senior 2003, 315)<sup>57</sup>

Just as I am linking the erotic lyrical content of Yellowman to the bawdy nature of many mento, benna and calypso songs, founder of the National Dance Theatre of Jamaica, Rex Nettleford, has linked the erotic movements of dancehall to mento

The movements in dancehall are nothing new, in my own youth I witnessed and participated in mento sessions which forced from executants the kind of axial movements which concentrated on the pelvic region (Nettleford 1994)

Ryman has also suggested that the erotic “dry grind” or “dub” found in contemporary dancehall dancing have antecedents in the “winey” or “winding” style of mento dance (Ryman 1980)

---

<sup>57</sup> Senior points out that this description of mento would be laughable to Jamaicans today, especially next to the eroticism of dancehall

Mento shared with calypso the trend of documenting current events in song and as early as the thirties itinerant singers on Kingston's streets, such as Slim and Sam, would sell their lyrics in tract form for a penny each (Barrow and Dalton 2004, 6, citing Charles Hyatt) As can be expected, mento, like its cousins calypso and benna, was preoccupied with risqué accounts of intimate acts, and "most mento songs were often wryly humorous accounts of everyday life among the Jamaican poor, with plenty of references to the perennial topic of sex" (Ibid, 7) Barrow and Coote, however, have argued that the difference in dancehall deejays like Yellowman, and the mento artist, is that the latter has a "subtlety of expression" "the mento artists have a far more innocent and gentle manner, whereas today's deejays are blatantly explicit" (Barrow and Coote 2004) And mento's risqué lyrics are less suggestive than Trinidadian calypso tradition (Ibid )

This is not to say mento was devoid of slackness, sexual activity was a favourite topic of Jamaica's mento singers Mary Bryant's "Little Boy" uses a sexual subtext as a running joke in a family conversation Her song "Tomato" was later immortalized by Phillis Dillon as "Don't Touch me Tomato" but started out as a mento The lyrics recognized that a male patron to the market was "hard like the coconut" but cautioned him

You touch me this touch me that  
Touch me everything I got  
Touch me plum, me apples too  
But here's one thing you just can't do

Please mister don't you touch me tomato  
Touch me yam, me pumpkin, potato  
For goodness sake don't touch me tomato

—Phillis Dillon, "Don't Touch me Tomato"

Continuing the produce market theme was Tony Johnson's "Give Her Banana" ("Give her banana in the day / Give her banana in the night / If you do she'll treat you right") Lord Power had his share of slackness and made little attempt to disguise it His "Strip Tease" is self-explanatory while his "Let's do it" revisits the bedroom activities of famous lovers in history Adam/Eve, Marc Antony /Cleopatra The Adam and Eve theme was popular, and was also employed in a polite form by Lord Flea's "It All Began With Adam and Eve" General Echo updated it on his *Slackest LP* and Yellowman used his version for his own remake in 1982 Both dancehall deejays, as can be expected, were far more blatant than their mento cousins

Lord Lebby's 1955 song "Dr Kinsey Report," was a popular mento song based on the sexual behavior of men and women, choosing Kinsey's *Sexual Behavior in the Human Male* (1948) and *Sexual Behavior in the Human Female* (1953) as its frame In the song, Lebby says Kinsey's report is "all about my favourite indoor sport" and goes on to complain that the sexual behaviour—read infrequency—of women is inadequate "My own experience of a human dish is they're not always everything a fellow wish" "Dr Kinsey Report" is valuable to this study for another reason On the other side of the record was a popular back to Africa song called "Etheopia"<sup>58</sup> Lebby stands as an excellent example of a Jamaican artist two decades before Yellowman that sang slack and cultural themes back to back Garnice (2007) presumes that judging by the availability of this record today, compared to any other mento 78, it must have been a popular record This is at a time when mento was declining in national popularity and its salacious

---

<sup>58</sup> "Etheopia" is misspelled on the record label The track was issued by Kalypso and attributed to The Jamaican Calypsonians with vocal Lord Leddy (Garnice 2007)

material was confined to sound systems, live concerts and private homes (White 1982, 38) "Etheopia," according to Garnice (2007) is considered the earliest recording of a back to Africa song and Barrow and Dalton list it as "one of the first expressions of Rastafarian consciousness on record" (Barrow and Dalton 2004, 7) It is unclear if Barrow and Dalton are reading too much into this and equating all back to Africa expressions with Rastafari. Certainly, Rastafarians were the most proactive about taking up this theme in reggae in the seventies and Bunny Wailer used near identical lyrics and melody as "Etheopia" on his 1980 track "Back in Jamaica." But it would be an error not to highlight the widespread expressions of Afrocentricism and Ethiopianism in the Caribbean that occurred outside the tradition of Rastafari. Marcus Garvey, for instance, the father of the back to Africa movement in Jamaica and throughout the African diaspora, was active since the early 1900s and, while Rastas claim him as a prophet and founding father, Garvey was never a Rastafarian. It is entirely possible then, that Leiby's song could be considered an expression of Rastafarian consciousness. In his song "Sweet Jamaica," for instance, Leiby sings about the difficulties of immigrating to London, which he calls Babylon. Garnice suggests this to be the first recorded instance of the use of the term on record in this context. "Between this and the theme of "Etheopia," the case can be made that Lord Leiby and the Jamaican Calypsonians are Jamaica's original cultural recording artists. They recorded Garveyite themes more than ten years before Burning Spear, and showed a nascent Rasta sensibility fifteen years before Rastafari became synonymous with reggae music" (Garnice 2007)

The influence of mento and calypso on Yellowman is tremendous. His ability to improvise and ride a riddim have direct antecedents in the tradition of both musical styles

and his body of work, which often focuses on the body itself, has many lyrical and musical quotes or tributes to these earlier styles. He based some of his material directly on mento songs, such as the aforementioned “Adam and Eve,” as well as “Hill and Gully Rider,” a track off the *Nobody Move* LP, that shares its title with a mento standard. Yellow also uses the mento standard “Hol’im Joe” in his song “Donkey Want Water.” But apart from borrowing themes and lyrics, Yellowman wholeheartedly adopted several of mento and calypso’s sexual discourse.

Sexuality is pervasive in calypso and many of the same themes that are found there show up in Yellowman’s work. Calypsonians have composed a substantial number of songs about their insatiable sexual appetite. According to Warner this is the “most overworked theme” of calypso and it is accompanied by the suggestion that the singer’s prowess in the bedroom “causes innumerable females either to cry in ecstasy, beg for more, or groan in agony if they cannot cope with their too-ardent lovers” (Warner 1985, 115). Dancehall shares this theme and Yellowman, particularly, has several songs that exhibit it. In Section III Chapter 1 I return to this and show how Yellowman reinvented himself as a super sexual albino using stereotypical tropes from white culture that define black bodies as hypersexual. His yellow “modern body” becomes an aphrodisiac for all women and is the source of his grandiose carnal powers.

Calypsonians and Mento artists enjoy boasting about sexual conquests and talents. Yellowman as well has several songs about his own exploits and abilities. Both try to impress the audience with the extent of their insatiable sexual appetite, so incurable that they often are not concerned with the beauty of their partner. They take a “breeding farm” approach to relationships and intimacy, seeking out successive coital partners, often for

the sake of impregnating them. Offspring feature for several reasons in these songs, often as proof of manhood, but also as a foil to contest the paternity of a lover's child. Following suit, Yellowman's songs often mention that his girlfriends either have given birth to yellow babies, so they must be his, or the babies are not Yellow, so he does not have to support them. Of course, generous physical endowments are also a favourite theme ("Sit Under You")

Yellowman also experimented with calypso-reggae fusion, first on his major label cross-over album *King Yellowman* (1984) with the song "Reggae Calypso," and then on a 1986 clash album with General Trees called *Reggae Calypso Encounter*. That album was mostly pure dancehall, though the tracks "Trees in de Place" and "Trees and Yellow in de Place" indeed fuse the two styles and the break down in "Nuh Tied Me" features a standard dancehall quarter note triplet rhythm that is derived from calypso. But while calypso and dancehall share many cultural similarities and histories, there is also a wide chasm between them.

One recurring theme among the reggae musicians in Kingston that I talked to or interviewed for this project was the double standard that exists between soca and dancehall. The music and dancing that occurs at dancehall sessions were unduly demonized for slackness while the yearly Carnival was a publicly sanctioned expression of sexuality. There is a classist division between soca and dancehall and the musicians I talked to felt that this is what led to the acceptance of soca and Carnival by the upper classes.

As part of the ongoing politics between the two styles of music, Yellowman often felt that he was snubbed by soca's main Jamaican proponent, Byron Lee. Producer, studio

owner, promoter and band leader Byron Lee, once called the “Lawrence Welk of reggae” by American critic Robert Christgau (Chang and Chen 1998, 98), has been derided in reggae histories as an uptown musician that smoothed the edges off Jamaican national musical expressions such as ska and reggae, and produced music for the tourism market as opposed to the ghetto dwellers. Chang and Chen point to Lee’s mixed race heritage, Chinese and African, as one reason for this in an industry where lighter skinned and middle class record producers often dominated over darker skinned and lower class artists (Ibid). Still, Lee’s role in popularizing the music beyond the ghetto is formidable. Not only was he Jamaican music’s representative to New York’s World Expo in 1964, he helped pave the way for acceptance of ska beyond downtown Kingston. “Nobody uptown knew what the music [ska] was about, they couldn’t relate to it. It can be said that we were responsible for moving the music from West Kingston into the upper- and middle-classes who could afford to buy records and support the music. Then radio picked up the music and it became the order of the day” (Byron Lee quoted in Chang and Chen 1998, 98).

With this history of animosity between Lee, seen as one of the elites, and many reggae artists, it is not hard to imagine two exchanges that Yellowman recounts happening between them. The first occurred in Negril, Jamaica’s west coast resort town where musicians held concerts regularly for the tourist market. A promoter named Shorty hosted a concert at Kaisers with Byron Lee and Yellowman. Lee was scheduled to go on first, with the more popular Yellowman closing the show, but Byron Lee played the whole show ignoring calls from the promoter and crowd to exit the stage and let Yellowman perform. A similar thing happened on a live taping of a JBC television

program where Lee took the entire time allotted for both artists, thereby squeezing Yellowman out. Yellowman interprets these events as examples of the contest between soca and dancehall and the division of race on the island. “The Chinese never like me,” he often says, referring to a song he penned called “Mr Chin” that blames Chinese store owners for hiking up prices of goods.

Despite the differences between calypso, soca, benna, mento and dancehall, artists like Yellowman drew on these popular genres when they sang or chatted slackness on soundsystems and in the studio. Audiences were familiar with slackness as one method of entertainment and understood that artists often used slackness to critique mainstream society. Yellowman may have been a louder voice than previous slack artists, but he did not singlehandedly usher in an era of slackness. He simply perfected one of the tools available to the Jamaican artists and marketed it convincingly.

## CHAPTER 3

### The Teenage Years

#### Alpha Boys School for Abandoned Children

Winston Foster was admitted to Alpha Boys' School in Kingston either on 11 May, 1967 or in 1971<sup>59</sup> The school's records say that upon entering Alpha a children's officer examined the youth and described him as an albino with "defective eyes and unhealthy skin" (Little 2009) The report states that Winston had a difficult time adjusting to the school and suggests it may have been because he was an albino

Sister Bernadette Little There is a section in the Children's Officer's report that stated that during the first three years that he was at the school at Alpha, no relative had come to see him, which leads one to suspect that he may not have had any worthwhile relationship with any family member She added that this may have accounted for his alienation from the other children (Little 2009)

What is usually listed simply as Alpha Boys School in reggae histories, is actually a series of institutions Alpha Business College (1925-2000), a high school (1894 until the present time), a primary school (1892 until the present), The Jessie Ripoll Primary (1980 until now), Alpha Infant School (1892 until now), a preparatory school (1894-1984) and a boarding school for girls (1894-1969) Founding mother Jessie (Justina) Ripoll, a Jamaican of Portuguese descent, was a member of Holy Trinity Cathedral Catholic Church and an active member of the Ladies of Charity She was moved by the plight of the poor in the years after the abolition of slavery and particularly troubled by the homeless children in Kingston In 1880 she pooled her money with two friends,

---

<sup>59</sup> As mentioned above, there is a discrepancy between Alpha records and Yellowman's memory

Josephine Ximenes and Louise Dugiol, and purchased a 43 acre property on South Camp Road. The trio established a girls' orphanage and four years after began to admit boys. By 1890 Ripoll and her companions were joined by the Sisters of Mercy from Bermondsey in London, England and by the spring of 1891 the three founders joined the Order of Mercy. Ripoll took as her religious name Sister Mary Peter Claver. The two schools, known as Industrial Schools, taught scholastics but also trained their students in practical skills—laundering, sewing, cooking, cosmetology and lace-making for the girls and printing and bookbinding, gardening, music, tailoring, carpentry, and tile and block making for the boys—in order to allow them to be self-sufficient upon leaving. By 1935 Maxfield Park Children's Home began sending boys to Alpha and by 1937 there were 400 boys enrolled in the school (Hyatt 2006, Little 2009).

Alpha Boys School enjoys a reputation in reggae history as a sort of musician factory. Its earliest band was a Drum and Fife Corps, which began in 1893, and a boys' choir was started in 1917. The music program there turned out several of Kingston's top musicians in the early sixties, including Skatalites members Johnny 'Dizzy' Moore, Lester Sterling, Tommy McCook and Don Drummond. The fact is, though, that the nuns that ran Alpha did so because of the second part of the school name: School for Abandoned Children.

When Winston moved to Alpha he was still considered an abandoned child by the state. His transferral to Alpha would prolong his exposure to taunts and verbal jabs, as well as physical beatings at the hands of his classmates, but it would also shield Winston from the alternatives available to him, a life spent on the streets hiding from public view with little or no employment prospects or, worse, a life of crime.

Just as when Yellowman returned to Maxfield Park with me and faced the scorn of one of the workers, Alpha Boys School is not as proud of its most famous student as it is of the other musicians that it graduated. Run by strict Catholic nuns under the leadership of Sister Ignatius, Yellowman's career was not looked on favourably due to his penchant for sex talk. He returned there later in life with an offer to do a free concert to help fundraise for the school but was denied entrance to the grounds. School head, Sister Ignatius, would not accept the offer from Yellowman because she did not approve of his slack lyrics.

Sister Bernadette Little. I knew that Sister Ignatius did not accept the offer made by Yellowman to do a benefit for Alpha Boys' School since she disapproved of the content of some of his lyrics, but the actual details of what took place between them is anyone's guess, since Sister Ignatius alone would have been able to shed further light. Furthermore, I must add that Sister Ignatius was one who said nothing to disparage any one, she is one of the most charitable persons we know and rather than speak ill of another, she would maintain silence. She spoke ill of no one and that is no exaggeration. (Little 2009)

Most of the school literature detailing the famous musicians that are Alpha alumni does not mention Yellowman. He is listed, however, on the Alpha Old Boys Association website under the achievements and alumni honours section for Excellence in Personal Achievements in Popular Performing Arts alongside such luminaries as Don Drummond, Johnny "Dizzy" Moore, Lester Sterling, Tommy McCook, Cedric "Im" Brooks, Leroy Wallace, Vin Gordon, and Leroy Smart (Hyatt 2006). And Sister Bernadette Little noted that she was encouraged by a newspaper article that featured Yellowman as a family man, "which showed his willingness to transcend the past and to give his family the love and

devotion he did not receive from his own family” (Little 2009) <sup>60</sup>

At Alpha Winston would receive Catholic instruction. He went to Mass, took communion, knelt down at cross and listened to sermons. He learned by heart the Lord’s Prayer, the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm and Hail Mary, and had to do rosary beads, the Stations of the Cross and go to confession. These rituals and meditations became meaningful to him and made him feel closer to God. But he would later harbour resentment against the Catholic Church for the sexual abuse of children and cites that as one of the main reasons he has not continued with Catholic observances.

Alpha represented a new era for the teenager, at Alpha Winston would, for the first time, be part of a team with other boys. His school record shows that Winston was good at gymnastics but took little interest in his studies (Little 2009). He played on the soccer team and the sport became an escape for him, away from the hassles of life as an outcast. He became quite a good player by his own measure and this endeared him to other boys, so that for the first time in his life he had friends. He even played on the Alpha Boys Soccer team, wearing the number 10 on his jersey and playing centre forward. He eventually made captain and finally, at least within the confines of the school, enjoyed some measure of respect.

Besides soccer he competed in acrobatics at Alpha and with area schools. Students would take turns doing tricks, Winston’s repertoire included walking on his hands, backwards somersaults, somersaults over a rope, a back flip and crab walking. A budding entertainer, Winston enjoyed pleasing a crowd and was even rewarded with the top prize on a few occasions. Later in life he never incorporated these acrobatic maneuvers into his

---

<sup>60</sup> The newspaper article is the *Sunday Gleaner*, November 13, 1983, page 4A.

stage performances but his ability to sustain the attention of the crowd was minted during this time. By the nineties his usual performance style—walking slowly or standing in one spot while deejaying—underwent a change as he started to draw on the physical entertainment of his acrobatic days. Contemporary Yellowman concerts see him running, leaping, jumping and stretching constantly. He rarely stands still, his energy boundless. He trains daily to stay healthy and remain in shape for his physically draining performances, jogging in the Kingston hills where he lives. The reason why he does this is simple: he is an entertainer, and the decisions he makes about what his performance will look like (costume included) and what his lyrics entail, are more often than not based on pleasing his audience.

Yellowman: I do that because I found that people love movement on stage. They like to see an artist move with the music. Because those days I used to just walk around but now I'm running. Because that brings more entertainment for the people. If you notice sometimes when I start jump they scream, you know.

The acceptance that he first found at Alpha was addictive and he has been craving it relentlessly ever since. One of the common reasons given by reggae artists when asked why they do slackness is that they are simply giving the people what they want. Yellowman's star shone the brightest in dancehall because he was the most adept at interpreting and delivering what the dancehall audience wanted to hear. I will return to this theme in more depth when I discuss attitudes towards slackness in society, differing perspectives on sexism in Yellowman's lyrics, and the gaps between how Yellowman and dancehall is understood outside the Caribbean and within the Caribbean.

Once at Alpha, being back in Kingston also meant being closer to the music industry and the early seventies was a time of intense excitement in reggae. Michael

Manley's socialist leaning People's National Party (PNP) defeated the conservative Jamaica Labour Party (JLP) in 1972 and fundamentally altered the mood of the country in short order "Afrocentricity, black consciousness, Rastafarian theology and militant anti-imperialist solidarity all informed a new national zeitgeist" (Chang and Chen 1998, 53)

Deejay culture was starting to come into its own with U-Roy and Big Youth becoming as well-known as Kingston's brightest singers Big Youth, in particular, was instrumental in taking Rastafari mainstream While reggae acts had been singing the praises of Jah Rastafari on a growing basis since the late sixties, there were as yet few dreadlocked reggae acts It was in this climate that Big Youth removed his tam on stage at the Joe Frazier Revue at Carib Theatre one night in 1973 and "first flashed his locks on stage And it was like everybody's jaw just dropped People just marveled at what they were seeing" (Frankie Campbell quoted in Chang and Chen, 1998, 53) Chang and Chen see this as a "defining moment not only in reggae but in Jamaican cultural history" because the island's biggest celebrity at the time rebuked the status quo that marked Rastas as dregs of society and glorified in "the most visible badge of resurgent Rastafarian pride" (Ibid ) The seventies also saw the increasing popularity of deejays Trinity, Dillinger, Jah Woosh, Dennis Alcapone and Doctor Alimantado were among the top deejays of the decade

It was at Alpha that Winston really start paying attention to music, it was here that Winston's love of deejay and Rasta music would develop, and it was in those halls where he first tried his hand at deejaying He absorbed the lessons and tenets of Rastafari though the works of the Jamaicans, Ras Michael, Culture, Bob Marley, and Jacob Miller and first

tried his hand at singing in front of others. Among his new friends were some, outside of school because they were not allowed inside, that were Rastas. He would get flogged with a cane by Sister Aloysius or Sister Ignatius for singing Rasta songs by artists such as the Wailers and Burning Spear.<sup>61</sup>

Yellowman 'Cause they used to say those songs was disturbing. Back in those days those songs were discriminated against by society, especially the political society, because those songs used to open eyes. And then them used to consider those songs non-message—they didn't carry any message.

His favourites included "Marcus Garvey," Burning Spear's heartfelt tribute to the pan-Africanist organizer turned prophetic figure in Rastafari mythology, and "Stir it Up," a song written by Bob Marley that Yellowman often cites as an example of Marley's slack lyrics. He singles out the lyric, "I'll push the wood / I'll blaze your fire / I'll satisfy your heart desire" to demonstrate the double meaning of the song: wood is Caribbean slang for penis and "blaze your fire" and "satisfy" here could allude to intercourse. Under this reading the chorus, "We could stir it up," becomes a suggestion for sex with the line "I'll stir it every minute / All you got to do, baby, is keep it in it" furthering the metaphor.

Winston also heard many of the American songs that he would eventually cover as choruses in his soundsystem shows, from Sam Cooke's "Bring it on Home" to *My Fair Lady's* "I'm Getting Married." He began making up his own lyrics and dreaming the dream that many ghetto youths shared: breaking out of poverty through a career in music. Before he ever attended a soundsystem or saw a live deejay at a stage show, Winston

---

<sup>61</sup> When I asked Sister Bernadette Little about this, she felt that Sister Ignatius's concern may have been misunderstood. "I do not think that Sister Ignatius disliked Rastas. She was very careful not to have their weed (marijuana) available to the boys who were under her care" (Little 2009).

started entertaining his new friends by making up lyrics, while another beat out a rhythm on a can

Yellowman I deejay to people at school, but not on a mic You did have some guy use the paint pan [pail] and make music with it to make riddim I deejay over it Deejays in those days usually did not sing, they only talked over the music Yet when Winston was urged to perform at school he would alternate between popular songs and his own deejay lyrics

Yellowman Like a guy would just come to me and say, ‘Yellow, sing a song fe me,’ and me just deejay a song, Sometimes sing a Sam Cooke or a Fats Domino, Dennis Brown, Bob Marley, Jimmy Cliff, Burning Spear<sup>62</sup>

### **Sister Ignatius’s Soundsystem**

By the mid-seventies, deejaying was as popular as singing and soundsystems were everywhere Winston did not have the opportunity to attend soundsystem dances outside of the school but he would be able to absorb soundsystem culture within the walls of Alpha Head nun Sister Mary Ignatius Davies was known for having her own soundsystem for playing dances at the school for students and alumni Called the Mutt and Jeff Soundsystem, it was named after the two Alpha employees she purchased the equipment from (Chamberlain 2009) There were no deejays on this dance but Yellowman well remembers hanging around the sound when it was playing songs by Bob Marley, Toots and the Maytals, and rocksteady hits Yellowman does remember some deejay music—like U-Roy and Big Youth, but outside of that, nothing Sister Ignatius’s love of Jamaican music was so important to the school that Alpha currently runs a

---

<sup>62</sup> Even though he says “Yellow” here, that name did not evolve until Eventide Home

fundraising campaign based on her record collection. Through their website, supporters can purchase a set of twelve drink coasters that “feature replications of twelve different record labels found in the amazing collection of Sister Ignatius” with funds helping to purchase new instruments for the music program ([www.alphaboyschool.com/coasters.htm](http://www.alphaboyschool.com/coasters.htm)). This collection gives us a hint at what a soundsystem dance might have played including alumnus Don Drummond’s ska classic “Eastern Standard Time,” but also features hits of the rocksteady and reggae eras.

As mentioned above, the music program at Alpha gained prestige in the reggae world when some of the students went on to create the Skatalites, and founded a music known as ska. The role Alpha played in preparing the architects of Jamaica’s indigenous music is repeated in many histories on reggae but Sister Ignatius’ role specifically has been celebrated widely. In an obituary published on Alpha’s website, she is called the “mentor and spiritual guide to the world-famous Alpha Boys’ School music program.” The obituary goes on to draw out the links between Sister Ignatius and the music program at the school.

The musical program of the School matured and gained a unique stature during the jazz-era of the forties and ‘50s. This period saw the training of the majority of Jamaica’s top hornsmen, many of whom would go on to be instrumental in the development of the island’s first indigenous pop music, ska. Ska’s most famous supergroup was the Skatalites, and four of its founding members—Tommy McCook, Johnny “Dizzy” Moore, Lester Sterling and the internationally-recognized Don Drummond—were all graduates of the Alpha Boys’ School. The Drummond-composed ska instrumental “Eastern Standard Time” (1964) was a perennial favorite for the Jamaican-born Sister Ignatius, who also ran Soundsystem dances for the students at Alpha. Alpha graduates went on to feature prominently in the emerging musical styles of rock steady and then reggae.

The “old boys,” as Sister Ignatius called her former students, provided a network of family for her visits overseas. During more recent years, Sister Ignatius remained a constant presence at Alpha, actively promoting the Alpha Boys’ School Band and hosting numerous foreign visitors and media institutions, all intent on

learning about the School's historical role in the development of Jamaica's musical identity. Many of Jamaica's musical luminaries also paid her the highest respect, including frequent guest Clement "Coxson" Dodd, Jamaica's most famous producer. Dodd recently assisted Sister Ignatius in completing the Alpha Boys' Band's new cd recording, *Come Dance With Me* ([www.alphaboyschool.com/iggy.htm](http://www.alphaboyschool.com/iggy.htm))

Yellowman would rarely feature among the prestigious group of musicians promoted and remembered by Alpha. He never attempted to enroll in the music program or the Alpha Boys Band, not playing an instrument himself. But the music culture at Alpha influenced him nonetheless, and he is proud of the association between he and other musical luminaries on the island that attended the school.

There were times when he would stay up late in the dormitory with his friends listening to the radio and singing. They would stay up past their curfew and sometimes punishment would be meted out—in the form of floggings—as a result. "The guys used to like me 'cause I was a comedian. They used to come around me because when you're around me you're never bored." But those late nights were special to Winston. Despite his hard life, he developed a natural demeanor that made people like him. He is always cracking jokes, many of them off colour, and when he is the centre of attention on his own terms, he enjoys it and rides it.

Breaking curfew was not the only thing Winston was punished for at Alpha. His acerbic tongue that later became one of his trademarks in the dance, often got him in trouble with the Sisters.

Yellowman: To tell you the truth, I was very rude in school. Not violent, though, but rude. I would back answer, if you talk to me and you say something I don't like I would say something back.

The mode of punishment was a slim cane but due to his sensitive skin, a doctor had told the sisters to beat Winston on the bottom of his feet where his skin was tougher so that it would mask any welts and marks. Winston was considered a troublesome boy and, according to his memory, spent weeks locked up—not allowed to go outside and play or eat with the other boys. Still, he says that the relationship between him and the nuns was good. It is difficult to ascertain exactly what that relationship was. Sister Ignatius has since passed away. She frowned on the career that Winston went on to forge because of his slack lyrics but, as Sister Bernadette has suggested, even if Sister Ignatius were alive it is doubtful that she would disparage Yellowman.

### **Eventide Years**

Just as Swift-Purcell and Maxfield Park could not find a suitable home for Winston, Alpha failed to adopt him out. But after completing high school there Winston was not allowed to go out on his own. Another government institution was found for him to live in, and he was discharged on June 1, 1974 to Eventide Home for the Unfortunate. The relocation to Eventide at the age of 19 in 1976 was just another instance of the state shuffling an unwanted youth between institutions. Eventide was built on Slipe Pen Road in Kingston 5 in 1870 to house elderly women. The area is now known as Terrington Park. By the late seventies it had opened its doors to other unfortunates such as the destitute, infirmed, elderly old men and children.

Yellowman After Alpha they think my life don't have any direction. Nobody want to adopt me, want me to live with them, because Alpha contact a lot of people and they say no, they always turned down. Because I was growing up I

had to leave so they found Eventide Home for me, that's the only place that would accept me at that time. Eventide is a place for neglected people, people who they think life don't have any direction. Finished. That's the reason why they call it Eventide—is like the evening of people's life.

Brent Hagerman: Would you have been free to leave eventide if you wanted?

Y: They wouldn't allow that.

BH: So if you didn't become artist and get famous what would have happened to you?

Y: I don't know. Still at Eventide type place or maybe I wouldn't be here.

Winston now was faced with the daunting task of creating a life for himself, finding a place in society where the double stigma of “unfortunate” and *dundus* would not plague him. By his late teens Winston was eager to get on with his life. He knew that his opportunities were few and that, with his colour, his pariah status and his institutional background, the odds were stacked against him to make it out of the ghetto. But Winston had ambition and he was determined to better his lot in life. He answered a “help wanted” ad in the newspaper and got a job at the Hope Garden Zoo on Hope Road but made sure to keep this a secret. Outside employment was not allowed at Eventide, and if the authorities there knew about his job they would expel him. The secrecy had to go both ways though and he did not tell his employer or fellow workers that he was living in the poor house, as that would add to his discrimination at work. At the zoo Winston was responsible for cleaning out the pens and feeding the animals. He would rise early and walk the almost 10 kilometers to the Zoo. He enjoyed the work and being with the animals and appreciated the opportunity to finally have some autonomy in his life. A paycheque and a job were tremendous achievements after years of institutional living.

Yellowman likens his time spent at Eventide to incarceration in a prison. He felt as an inmate, because he was not granted permission to leave permanently. His frustration at his physical and social imprisonment started to manifest in his actions. He began to fight with others at Eventide and on the street. He gravitated towards the Kingston underworld of gangs, dons, political thugs and “badmen.”

In the late seventies political violence in Kingston was rampant, the two-party system that had emerged in the wake of the first general election in the forties polarized the community under either the ruling party, Michael Manley’s socialist-leaning People’s National Party (PNP), or Edward Seaga’s right of centre opposition party, the Jamaican Labour Party (JLP). Based on an entrenched system of distribution of partisan benefits to party supporters, or what Gray calls the “discriminatory use of state largesse” (Gray 2004, 26), political support in Jamaica is marked by aggressive partisan loyalties that has led to a culture of political violence, particularly in Kingston, St Andrew and St Catherine (Hope 2006). These areas are divided into what is known as garrison constituencies: political strongholds controlled by one of the political parties and associated with “positional gun warfare and the illegal gun trade” (Figueroa and Sives 2003, 75). They are communities that live beyond the law but with state support, they are safe havens for lawbreakers as long as the criminal activity is directed externally. “the tight integration between local party structures and criminal gang organizations [ensures] a fair measure of political protection from police action” (Harriott 2000, xxv, 16). According to Figueroa, a garrison community is “one in which the dominant party can, under normal circumstances, control the voting process” (Figueroa 1994, 6).

Outbreaks of violence during election campaigns were commonplace. Michael

Manley estimates over 800 people died during the 1980 campaign and Hope suggests that number may be closer to 1000 (Hope 2006, Manley 1982) Political thugs used violence to intimidate rival supporters Eventide Home was in a PNP controlled garrison which meant that the badmen that Yellowman hung around with in those days were aligned with that party He witnessed PNP gunmen coming on the grounds to intimidate the residents, and ensure their support This tumultuous mix of violence and politics was part of everyday life for residents of downtown Kingston

It was at Eventide that Yellowman started getting in trouble with the law Most of the Eventide staff did not like him or trust him, probably because of his criminal associations, and blamed him when things went wrong at the home Once he was detained at the police station by investigators when two gunmen killed a police officer on Eventide's grounds He was eventually let go due to lack of evidence

Yellowman Me and the police never have good relations because I used to move around [with] a lot of rough guys like George Phang, Ump1 Starkey, Mardo, Linky Roy, Tunda The Police kill all those guys Out of all those guys only George is there

George Phang is a noted dancehall producer of the eighties and the man some claim is the don of Concrete Jungle Phang has long been a Yellowman supporter and it is doubtful that without his help Yellowman could have gained an audience in those early days Phang grew up on the same streets as Winston and was impressed by the youth's talent Phang hung with a rough crew, the kind that would have been called rudies in the sixties but went by the name badmen by the eighties It was during this time, and due to the influence of his new friends, that Winston started carrying a gun, a 38 pistol Having

grown up largely amongst PNP supporters and thugs Winston followed suit Normal life included guns and political intimidation He took his gun to political rallies and even shot it in the air on occasion

Yellowman I never shoot anybody I shoot after people in political rivalry but nobody never get hurt It was like a rivalry, like tribal war, you know, tribalism I never consider myself as a PNP

Perhaps carrying a gun, hanging around gangsters and fighting were ways for an albino outcast to exercise some means of agency, to be in control of his present and future Ghetto youth had little idea of what life was like outside the ghetto His job at the zoo afforded him some measure of autonomy, but it was doubtful a custodial vocation would allow him to escape ghetto life or even Eventide With very little opportunities present, Winston's ambition found an outlet on the streets where the excitement of violence and criminal power dulled the sting of poverty And it may have descended him into a life of crime if music had not saved him

**Gunshot it Nuh Respect No One**

Gunman, say tell me whey you get yuh gun from?  
You mus a get it from the foreign land  
You wan' come shoot dung your own black man

Gunshot it nuh respect no one  
It kill soldier man, it kill policeman  
It kill policeman, also badman  
It kill badman, also civilian  
It kill civilian, also Christian  
It kill animal, also human  
—Yellowman, “Gunman”

Violence and criminal behaviour are never far away in Kingston, even if you are a dancehall superstar. Houses all over the city are rimmed with tall walls and security fences, houses routinely have bars on the windows and security devices. Businesses often have armed guards. Several of Yellowman's contemporaries have been killed by guns: General Echo, Ranking Toyon, Junjo Lawes.

Once Yellowman started to gain a following he realized that he was in a position where people looked up to him. This new sense of responsibility weighed on him and as a result he got rid of his gun and ceased the badman lifestyle. Yellowman's success has meant that he no longer lives in downtown ghettos, yet he is still affected by the warfare that emanates out of them. Since the early eighties he has had a series of houses in New Kingston in richer neighbourhoods like Meadowbrook, Cherry Gardens and Red Hills. He currently lives in Armour Heights, not far from Mavado, where he rents a large house overlooking the fray of Kingston below. It is a steep climb up the hills that surround Kingston to the north. He lives almost at the top of a hill adorned with many mansions and other large houses. His house is modest in comparison to many and you can only see

part of it from the road. The kitchen and side balcony have a phenomenal panoramic vista of Kingston. Kingston is built on a hillside, it is as if the city was tipped up on its side and all the poor people slid down to the bottom and all the middle and upper classes managed to hang on at the top. Those that start at the bottom, like Yellowman, have had to claw their way up.

Even during my fieldwork with Yellowman I came to respect the randomness with which violence can strike in Kingston. I had done a photo shoot with Yellowman in February 2008 at and around his home in Armour Heights. I was amused by Yellowman's penchant for entertainment and flare for drama—he had prepared for the shoot by choosing out three costumes. One was a sport jacket, pin-striped shirt and hat, one a New York Bicycle Police uniform and the third a U.S. Desert Storm military uniform. The photo shoot was utterly enjoyable with Yellowman embodying different characters based on the clothes he was wearing. The significance of law enforcement uniforms would become clearer to me a few days later when I arrived at Yellowman's house with Ted, Yellowman's taxi driver, in order to accompany Yellow to a concert in Ocho Rios. Here is a section from my field notes:

*February 23, 2008*

*Late in the afternoon I got ready to meet with Yellowman to drive to Ochi. Ted took me up to his house around 9. When we were talking at the gate Ted noticed a small hole almost in the centre of his [car] hood. Upon closer inspection we all agreed it looked like a bullet hole. He said he had heard a loud noise and thought something had hit his car earlier in the night but had forgotten to get out and check it later. He was a little shaken up, obviously, as Yellowman ran down a more than likely scenario: either a stray bullet, someone trying to scare a random driver, or—his favorite interpretation—carjackers trying to shoot the driver and steal the car. He said the same thing happened to Simeon and the windshield was shot in his van. After mentioning this Yellow turned to me and said, "Remember, I have the police uniform. That the way I think—like a detective." Yellowman advised Ted to go and report the incident to the police (I asked him about it the next day and it didn't sound like he was going to). Yellowman was noticeably*

*concerned about Ted's welfare, commented on the gun violence in society and then asked Ted if he was going to get a licensed firearm Ted didn't really sound like he wanted to go that route That incident, while in some ways made lighthearted by our standing around and dreaming up theories on how it happened, brought home the real violence here to me It can affect the innocent bystander<sup>63</sup>*

---

<sup>63</sup> Simeon is Yellowman's manager and keyboard player

## CHAPTER 4

### Breaking into the Music Business

#### Why Them a Fight I So?

Why them a fight I so?  
A true me a yellow and them a negro  
—Yellowman, “Them a Fight I”

If me try to reach the top dem wan see Yellowman drop  
And if Yellow don’t try at all whole a dem say dat me a slip and a fall  
Caw Yellowman chat it after all by Saint Peter by Saint Paul  
—Yellowman, “King of the Crop”

Kingston had no shortage of destitute ghettos and they were each filled with youths striving to win over record producers with their lyrics, their style and their stage appeal. The ambition that drove Winston was no doubt inherited from black leaders such as Marcus Garvey who espoused black nationalism, pride of self, and Afrocentricity in the early 1900s. By the time Yellowman was trying to start a music career these philosophies had become the hallmarks not only of ghetto youths but of the Rastafari. Winston also inherited some measure of ambition from the resilient Afro-Jamaican culture he grew up in but it was his many years suffering humiliation and floggings at Maxfield, Swift-Purcell, and Alpha that forced him to love himself, since no one else would. It was this ambition that allowed Winston to hit the hot pavement and knock on the doors of all the studios in Kingston. A music career would be a surefire ticket out of poverty.

It was tradition among Jamaica’s music producers that auditions were held,

usually on a weekly basis, to find new talent Kingston's cut-throat music industry survived on fresh sounds—the next best thing—and any youth that promised to give one producer an edge over the others was destined for an audition <sup>64</sup> By this time Winston had deejayed and sang in front of friends enough that he felt he could audition at one of these studios Knowing that this is how the industry worked Winston, armed with some lyrics, went in search of producers

Yellowman Before I start deejaying in dance and stage show and doing recording, I used to go to every studio back in the late seventies coming into the eighties All those studio, I go to all of dem Harry J, I go to Channel One, Joe Gibbs, Music Works I go to Dynamic Sound, Sonic Sound, Aquarius I go to a lot of studio and they turn me away Some even beat me, whoop me ass, man, ya Like they say, what me a doing on there, come out and kick [me]

Studio owners employed people to keep out the riff-raff and they would reject Winston and call him racially based names that emphasized his lack of blackness like “white man,” “dundus,” “Molotov,” “red bwoy,” “red dog” and “yellow dog ” “Those days racism was in the sky, high they think that a person like me wouldn't sell [records] or wouldn't make it ” Studios told him that a dundus could never have the talent needed to sing on record, implying that he was worthless to them and society

Yellowman I would go to Joe Gibbs and I would say, “I am a artist and my name is Yellowman and I would like to do a song for you ” And him say, “Who you? Man like you can't do song ” And then the other artists would jump on me and kick me out Not Joe Gibbs himself, but he's the one who instigate it

Despite this rejection wherever he went Winston's resolve remained firm “Maybe

---

<sup>64</sup> The level of competition among studios was heated Besides being on the look-out for new vocal talent, studios also encouraged new sounds from their musicians Sly Dunbar speaks about coming up with the popular “rockers” drumbeat in the mid-seventies because he had to develop a new beat to help Channel One compete against Bunny Lee's popular “flying cymbal” (Dunbar 2006)

because I'm strong, maybe because I have a strong mind and a will power, you know There's something that God give me, you know? 'Cause I never give up on anything if I set out for that " The beatings would take their toll though Today his face is disfigured, mainly due to operations to remove cancerous tumours in his neck and jaw' but he feels that the many beatings he took to his head and face have also contributed to it "I got a lot of beat up," he says, "I got hit in my face and my head " But "I never considered it serious [at the time]" and so never went to a doctor or hospital for treatment Instead, it was all part of growing up scorned in the ghetto

Yellowman spent the first twenty years of his life overcoming the severe prejudice and hatred that society had for him simply because of his skin colour, and made it his mission to prove them wrong when they told him he was worthless Materially, his poverty would be alleviated by 1982 when he found himself in the extremely enviable position of being only the second musician on the island to afford a BMW The first was Bob Marley But his self-worth was never in question by the man that was shown almost no love his entire childhood Hatred forged resilience, neglect fostered ambition and the indomitable drive to succeed bore a creativity that would be measured not just in wealth and radio hits but in a revamping of the entire way the reggae industry was fashioned and perceived around the world

### **Who Can Make the Dance Ram?**

Who can make the dance ram? Who can make the dance ram?  
Who can make it cork? Who can make it cork?  
No other deejay in this island, ongle Yellowman can, the number one  
Who can make the dub play? Who can make the dub play?

Night and day, night and day  
No other sound in dis island ongle my sound can, de champion  
—Yellowman, “Who Can Make the Dance Ram?”

Everyday Winston could hear soundsystems and radios playing reggae music made by other youths that also had the odds stacked against them. A soundsystem party was called either a session or a dance and the terms “dancehall” or “inna de dance” could signify the dance space created by a soundsystem. Kingston was filled with soundsystems, each drawing dancers and music lovers to both indoor and outdoor venues that were more affordable than live music concerts.

Thousands of dance goers would turn out weekly, especially from Friday evening to Sunday morning to dancehalls and lawns and other ritualized dance spaces across Jamaica. From an iconic venue such as Forrester’s Hall at Love Lane and North Street, Kingston, to the ubiquitous zinc or bamboo, or coconut frond (or any combination of these) enclosed space with or without a roof annexed to a rum bar or by itself, dancehalls sprang up in large numbers across Jamaica, signaling the making of a cultural revolution that was to have a profound ontological impact on Jamaica and the world (Hutton 2007, 18).

The deejay style started with emcees in the fifties filling the gap between record changeovers—soundsystems had only one turntable in those days—and lulls in a song by jive talking announcements like American radio deejays, introducing songs and improvising banter. Salewicz cites Count Machuki (aka Winston Cooper) as the first person to talk over records, or “toast” or “chat” as it is known in Jamaica, on December 26, 1950 at a dance run by renowned soundsystem operator Tom the Great Sebastian. “Machuki began the tradition of Jamaican deejaying adding his own vocal inflections to cover any dips in a record’s energy” (Salewicz 2001, 16). The practice became an art form in its own right as other aspiring deejays picked up on Machuki’s new trend. By the

sixties King Stitt would be the first deejay to release a record and by the end of the decade U-Roy would revolutionize the art form and set the template for dancehall reggae and, ultimately, Yellowman U-Roy had worked for Coxson's Downbeat as a secondary deejay but it was with King Tubby's Home-Town Hi-Fi that he enjoyed the most success Tubby was a gifted producer and innovative technician His experiments in the studio of dropping out the vocals and re-mixing the instruments became known as dub It was Tubby that first added echo and reverb to a deejay's voice—something that quickly became a mainstay in the dance—and part of U-Roy's mystique was the sound of his words echoing U-Roy started recording with Lee Perry and Keith Hudson, but went on to chart with records cut at Duke Reid's Treasure Island In 1969 he had three records in the top spots on the radio charts "Wear you to the Ball," "Wake the Town" and "Rule the Nation" (Ibid , 82)

When deejays first started they were seen by musicians as gimmicky street-level performers, not serious (Ibid , 77) but by the late seventies deejays were starting to take over singers as the most popular entertainers on the island And the soundsystem was the reason for this—sounds were the domain of the deejay, not the singer

Soundsystems played the same role that radio historically played in North America and the U K—it gave new artists exposure and opportunity to get heard Since Jamaican radio was not playing the style of music that was popular on the streets, the soundsystems filled a void American music journalist Lester Bangs, writing in 1976, was surprised at the state of Jamaican radio when he visited there to interview Bob Marley "Jamaican AM radio almost never plays reggae After a week of very little beyond Helen Reddy and Neil Diamond, I would be anxious to get the hell out of this place and back

home just so I could hear some Toots and the Maytals” (Bangs 2004)

Yellowman credits the soundsystems for breaking him. People heard about him and were able to follow him around the island once he held a nightly residency at Aces International. Soundsystems drew their audience by playing popular songs, or exclusive dub plates recorded by singers specifically for that sound, having good quality equipment and boasting the best deejays who would perform live (Chamberlain 2007). A popular sound would not only have a recognized and loved deejay, it would also receive pre-release copies of newly recorded material from the island’s top producers. This way, the artists gained exposure and feedback in the dance, and the sound could attract patrons who knew they would hear fresh material on any given night, and songs that were not yet available in the record shops.

Typically, the sound’s selector would spin a record of a popular song by a singer or vocal group, such as Dennis Brown, Alton Ellis, Bob Marley, the Mighty Diamonds, the Heptones, or Sugar Minott and then, after it finished, they would play the “dub,” “dub plate” or “version” of the song, meaning just the instrumental riddim alone without the vocals. Deejays would then chat lyrics over the instrumental. Dub plates were geared towards deejays who could improvise lyrics on the spot and deejays kept a running competition to one-up each other with the best lyrics. So soundsystems were the venue of the live deejay, not the singer, though some sounds did carry a resident singer as well. Deejays were already selling on record, thanks to the popularity of U-Roy, Big Youth and later Trinity, Michigan and Smiley, and Lone Ranger, but the excitement of seeing them improvise in the dance—deejays might not know what riddim was coming next or might have an unknown sparring partner on stage to interact with vocally—added the

dancehall experience <sup>65</sup> A soundsystem in those days would only have one resident deejay but sometimes that deejay might bring an apprentice on stage. A dance could start as early as seven in the evening and not finish until the sun came up the next day. And a deejay would be expected to entertain for the entire night, only given breaks when aspiring local talent would fill in. Deejays had to be versatile to keep an audience interested, both in musical style and content. “sometime you have fe go like a preacher, and next time you have fe go for the girls” (Burru Banton quoted in Stolzoff 2000, 99)

The soundsystems also acted as an audition ground for record producers. If a producer came to a dance and liked what a deejay was doing, he would offer to take them into the studio and put it on record. “All the producers used to come, like Sly and Robbie and people like Gussie Clark, Junjo, Black Scorpio, Jammys, Tubby. All a dem used to come, all the producers used to come in de dance” (Yellowman, interviewed by Chamberlain 2007). For a deejay like Yellowman, the soundsystems were also a venue to practice new lyrics in front of a discerning crowd. Many of his early songs were worked out live in front of an audience long before they were committed to record.

### **Only Yellowman We Want to Hear Alone**

Since it was Winston’s body, not his voice, that was his impediment, his next plan of action would prove to be ingenious. The studios did not want him because their eyes told them he was probably worthless before they even got a chance to hear him deejay. What he needed were critics that could vote with their ears. He found those critics at the

---

<sup>65</sup> Now when Yellowman plays a dance, he takes his own backing tracks with him.

dancehalls, at the nightly soundsystems that play all around Kingston Soundsystem operators were interested in any artist that could keep the fickle crowds entertained Unlike at the studios, a would-be deejay had a chance to show the sound's operator right away if he or she could please the public<sup>66</sup> Producers would have to pay for studio time (including in many cases a band, an engineer, and tape), then pay to manufacture a record, then use their soundsystem connections to get the new disc heard on a popular sound just to see if the public liked it Many producers owned studios and/or soundsystems but there was still the element of risk involved in the outlay of money to an engineer, band and record manufacturer They had to invest considerably more time and money in an unestablished artist than did the independent soundsystem operator who could try out a budding artists for free and decide only after he heard the crowd's response if the new artist had staying power For Winston there was an added bonus soundsystems operated in the dark at night so artists that got a chance on the microphone were not in the public eye In fact, deejays in those days rarely interacted with the crowd and many faced the selector, not the audience

Beth Lesser People weren't watching the deejays If you go back before everybody started going on stage shows and making videos and doing everything for the camera, back before that, it was just dark It's actually such an interesting experience to be at one of those old dances because it is just so totally foreign It's not like anything you've ever seen in Canada or the United States It's dark and you just feel the music You dance or stand there and just listen It's totally an aural experience (Lesser 2009)<sup>67</sup>

So, to give a dundus a chance at the microphone was less costly financially and socially

---

<sup>66</sup> While most deejays at that time, and still today, are men, there were some notable female deejays at that time such as Sister Nancy

<sup>67</sup> Beth Lesser is a Canadian photographer, journalist and author that spent a considerable amount of time in Jamaica during the eighties covering dancehall for *Reggae Quarterly*, a magazine she edited

than to give him a chance in the studio. Thanks to a connection, one soundsystem let Winston try his hand at the microphone.

Winston started his deejay career on small local sound in 1977 called Little Mafia that used to operate in the Barbican neighbourhood of Kingston. Yellowman insists he had never been to a soundsystem dance previously. The first time he attended one it was with the intention of performing on it. He had a friend that lived in Franklyn Town whose daughter's babyfather was Tony Mafia, owner of Little Mafia. This was the connection Winston needed to get on the microphone in front of people. The problem is, even though Tony Mafia agreed to let Winston deejay as a favour to his relative, he made sure it was after the crowd had left for the night.

Yellowman: I used to only get the mic when the dance was over, when everybody leave, like when them packing up, like two minutes before them pack up when there was no crowd there.

They don't put me on until everybody leave. That's way in the morning in daylight, when they packing up. [But] I keep on going there.

Hoping for a break, Winston returned again and again to Little Mafia but Tony only let him take the microphone after the main deejays were done and the crowd had thinned. Little Mafia was not a big sound, it was what is known as a "house set" with only small speakers, not the type of sound that could shake the neighbourhood with rumbling bass. But this is where Winston found a sympathetic soundman and this is where he would begin to win over the dancehall audience.

Now that he was actively trying to break into the dancehall scene, Winston started visiting other soundsystems and checking out other dances. He remembers seeing his first

deejay clash between Jah Love with Brigadier Jerry and Stereophonic with General Echo at Half Way Tree (Chamberlain 2007)

Winston returned to Little Mafia five or six times and the same thing occurred, the main deejay would perform while the crowd was present and a few minutes before packing up Tony would let Winston take a turn Deejaying to an almost nonexistent audience would not last long however After several attempts to get Tony Mafia to put him on earlier in the night, it was the tiny crowd's reaction that convinced the soundman to try Yellow out in front of a larger audience

Yellowman The people who used to stay used to talk in the streets so it start getting to everybody ears They hear because they used to tape cassettes One night the guy who deejay right through the night—they said no, they want to hear me, they don't want to hear him anymore That's when I get my big chance I do that for a couple of years

The way Yellowman tells it, his initial rise in dancehall was organic and based on word of mouth and bootlegged cassette tapes that floated around Kingston in the days after a dance A few people that heard him at the end of each night told their friends until enough people wanted to hear him during the main part of the entertainment When he actually was able to show off for a crowd he was a hit

The exact chain of events here is murky The liner notes to *Live at Sunsplash* say that the first time Yellowman deejayed in front of people the crowd pointed fingers at him and laughed, shouting "dundus come off" Yellowman himself has offered two versions of this story, and both deny that this happened in this way He has said that the first time he took hold of the microphone he expected boos, "but they don't start pointing finger, you know," expecting ridicule but not finding it The second agrees that there were

fingers pointing at him but offers a different explanation as to why “That’s when everybody start pointing finger at we, you know? Like they say that guy going to be something ” Perhaps this story has been confused with another instance that occurred not long after Winston’s first stint at Little Mafia. As the popularity of Yellowman’s weekly deejaying at Little Mafia grew, so did his opportunities. One night after the show he was approached by the owner of a club called Spanish Jar on Orange Street. Soon Yellowman was booked to play his first stage show or club gig. At sound systems the deejay or singer talks or sings over records and often there is no stage to speak of, just a little standing room near the selector. At a stage show Yellowman would have to perform with a live band for the first time on a stage. When he walked onto the stage at Spanish Jar he started deejaying about bad-boy General Starkey and then broke into one of his signature tunes “I’m Getting Married in the Morning,” a deejay version of the *My Fair Lady* song. Usually this went over well with the Little Mafia crowd, but there was a problem this time, people starting booing. While it is possible that the booing was racially motivated because of Yellowman’s skin colour, Yellowman insists that this was a political act. The song mentions church bells (“Ding dong the bells are going to chime”) and as the bell is the symbol of the Jamaican Labour Party,<sup>68</sup> the crowd assumed he was singing a political song. Political parties were in the habit of taking popular reggae songs and putting their own lyrics to them, just as some artists outrightly supported one or the other party in their songs. This was a dangerous occupation in Kingston, and there were producers and artists that had to leave the island because their songs got used that way (Lesser 2009).

There are other layers to the story as well. Yellowman is adamant that the crowd

---

<sup>68</sup> The freedom bell was introduced as a party symbol by Edward Seaga in 1961

liked him immediately and showed no prejudice against him. The crowd at a dance would not have been able to see what he looked like anyway since small sounds had no stages for a deejay to stand on and often they would not even face the audience, preferring instead to face the selector, or even remain completely behind him blocked from view. Later Yellowman would be among the pioneers who treated the dancehall space like a stage show and be aware that his visual presence in front of an audience could carry a dramatic effect. Sly Dunbar and Willa corroborate this. Both have said that Yellowman was the first deejay they saw to turn and face the audience. Deejays like Brigadier, even though he was one of Jamaica's most popular deejays at the time, used to face the selector and have his back to the crowd. Yellowman turned the dancehall into a performance by dressing up for it like a stage show, and deejaying to the audience just as a singer would direct their performance at the listeners. He was there to entertain the audience, loved being in front of people, and probably thought it odd that the other deejays hid from the audience. For now, however, it is not hard to imagine that the young albino was only interested in proving he could deejay.

Other deejays on Little Mafia and later sounds where he would perform, however, could see him and were not so kind. They would make fun of him in their lyrics, refuse to hand the microphone to him and, worse, would publicly shun him by refusing to give him the microphone or acting as though it needed sanitizing after he used it. Yellowman interpreted this as jealousy as much as prejudice because of what he saw as his natural superior talent. To combat this prejudice Yellowman relied on his friends George Phang, Eek-A-Mouse, Jim Brown and General Starkey who would intimidate anyone who dared make fun of Yellowman or keep him from performing.

Yellowman The other deejays were jealous and used to scorn me When I finish deejay on mic I pass the mic to them, they use a kerchief, a rag or a towel to cover it up Eek-A-Mouse used to rough up guys to give me the mic because Eek-A-Mouse used to like me And George Phang used to rough up guys and say, “Give him the mic ” “Only Yellowman we want to hear alone”—Starkey used to say that And Jim Brown used to do the same thing—he’s another Don from the other party, Tivoli Garden

Brent Hagerman How long did this go on for? As soon as a selector would hear you would he be won over or did George Phang and crew have to use his muscle for quite a while?

Y It go on for a few months

BH Until you built your name?

Y Ya, until after I do Tastees now, then that’s it <sup>69</sup>

Eek-A-Mouse was one of the first deejays to help Yellowman out Yellowman told Chamberlain in an interview in 2007 that soundsystems afforded him an opportunity to get known but that it was Eek-A-Mouse who was instrumental in helping him become an established deejay and welcoming him onstage

Yellowman I couldn’t get no opportunity to hold the mic because dey would [not] give me da mic Here comes Eek-A-Mouse, him take the mic and give it to me and people start sey yeah, great the other entertainer them vex, like them mad But being as Eek is so tall and big dey used to scared of him, you know? So dey didn’t say anyting but I notice that they mad cause they leave and they talk and they go away you know but Eek was alright ”(Yellowman, interviewed by Chamberlain 2007)

Of course, in retrospect, depending on who you talk to, many people suggest it was them who first offered Yellowman the mic Lesser quips, “It’s amazing how many people in

---

<sup>69</sup> Since he uses the name Yellowman here, this may have occurred later However, his use of the moniker demonstrates how Yellowman does not differentiate between pre- and post-Yellowman days He never refers to himself as Winston, and often refers to himself in the third person It is not as though, in his mind, Yellowman is a creation that started in 1978—he sees himself as always having been Yellowman

Jamaica were the first people who ever gave Yellowman the mic” (Lesser 2009)

Yellowman would deejay at Little Mafia on weekends, at first under his own name, Winston Foster, and made sure he kept the fact that he was living at Eventide a secret so that the stigma would not plague him. Still, the rude behaviour of other deejays would continue for several years and he had to contend with other entertainers who saw his presence beside them in the dancehall as a chance to turn him into the brunt of their jokes. But as Winston’s popularity grew, the crowd began to boo any deejay who dared withhold the microphone from him and as the soundmen saw the crowd standing up for the dundus on stage, the power of the rival deejays diminished. “The reason why they couldn’t kick me out, the sound owners they love me because I was pulling the crowd so they couldn’t do anything like studio, you know”

As Yellowman’s popularity grew he branched out from Little Mafia and made the rounds to several soundsystems attempting to get his name out. He deejayed on Gemini and Virgo and on a smaller sound called Black Art. The selector at Black Art was Mellow. On a trip to Trenchtown in February 2008 Yellowman and I passed by Mellow as he was setting up a soundsystem for a show that night. He recognized Yellowman in the car and hailed us down. Mellow remembers that in those days Yellowman still had to prove himself on stage every night while rival deejays scorned him.

Mellow: In them days most man never want give Yellowman the mic. Them scorn him. Just when him get international every man start run come side of him” (Mellow 2008)

What the dancehall enabled Winston to do was prove himself in front of an audience that was not distracted by his colour. Audience members at small soundsystem

dances were not accustomed to visually engaging the deejay at that time and so it is possible that many of the first listeners were not immediately aware that a dundus was on the microphone. He would later tell a journalist that he preferred doing stage shows over sound systems because he liked people to be able to see him—this was a far cry from where he began (Saunders 1983, 15). The rest of Jamaica first heard about Yellowman through word of mouth and via cassette tapes before they saw him and they liked what they heard.

Brent Hagerman: So, at this point at Barbican, [the audience] couldn't see you, is this right?

Yellowman: Right, they couldn't see me.

BH: So they didn't know what you looked like. So is this partly why you became popular, do you think?

Y: Ya man, the voice, the voice was very good on the mic. It sound good.

BH: I would think as a studio owner it would be the same thing.

Y: Ya, it's the same thing but because they think that a person like me wouldn't sell or wouldn't make it.

BH: So they were prejudiced because of that?

Y: Right, and remember, those days racism was in the sky, high.

BH: So then the sound guys could try you out on the mic to see if you were any good.

Y: Right. Ya, ya.

BH: So then what happened when people started to see you?

Y: That's when the people surprised and the colour thing became, like they want to see who is this man. Because in those days I sound like a big big man because I have a big voice but I have a little body.

BH But you were tall

Y Ya, but the body, you know And they was fascinated by that and surprised, you know And then my type of people never used to come out, they always hiding But after me come out you have albino doctors, police, lawyers, entertainers

Soon, after people realized the deejay they were listening to was an albino, they started calling him Ranking Dundus, an ironic pairing of terms since ranking insinuates “top rank” and dundus, worthless or bottom rank For the first time in his life the crowd of people were staring at him with adoration instead of contempt And the boogie was reserved for the other entertainers that would try and publicly scorn Winston He was finally winning admirers to his side

The name Ranking Dundus would not last long As a defiant symbol of self-pride in his deejay abilities and his skin colour, Winston started wearing all yellow outfits and wholeheartedly accepted yellow as a symbol of strength “I start walking in the street wearing yellow tings, yellow clothes, eat yellow things ” As Winston became known in the dancehall people in the neighbourhood around Eventide began to recognize him in the street and started calling him “yellow man ” “And I say, “Ya, that’s a good name Yellow submarine, Yellowman, ya So it would be a popular name, you know?” The name stuck and Yellowman soon embodied the new persona When producer Junjo Lawes gave him his first car, a BMW, he even had it painted yellow

Jamaican music has a long history of noms de plume but dancehall artists have embraced the practice to a much greater extent than their mento, ska, rocksteady and reggae forebears While many would continue the male Jamaican youth culture’s love of Hollywood westerns (Josey Wales, Clint Eastwood, Lone Ranger) or choose stage names

that either suggested their microphone dominating status (Super Black, Ranking Toyan, Admiral Bailey, Major Worries, Brigadier Jerry, Dr Alimantado, Lt Stitchie, Prince Jazzbo, Shabba Ranks, Cutty Ranks) or their allegiance to Rastafari (Jah Thomas, Jah Stitch, Jah Rubel, Prince Far I) Yellowman's name was as unique as it was appealing in a self-depreciating sort of way. No other albino entertainers had been welcomed on soundsystem stages and now here was this one banking on his albinism to create hype for his stage act. Soon other albinos would follow suit, such as King Mellow Yellow and Purpleman. Unlike calypsonians, whose sobriquets were designed to show grandeur (Mighty Sparrow, Lord Kitchener, Atilla the Hun), there was a tradition among reggae artists to progress from a more humble name, say Prince Jammy, to a regal name—King Jammy—only when the title was deserved. Yellowman underwent a similar progression. In 1982 he released an album *Mister Yellowman*, but 1984 brought *King Yellowman*, a name he has used since the Jamaican press dubbed him king of the dancehall in the wake of an historic performance at Sunsplash 1982.<sup>70</sup>

---

<sup>70</sup> McDaniel points out that titles such as King and Lord among calypso singers are colonial hierarchical names and that younger calypso singers avoid them (McDaniel 1998, 963-964)

## CHAPTER 5

### Slackness, a New Genesis

#### Slackness: A Caribbean Institution

In 1989 American hip-hop act 2 Live Crew caused widespread controversy with the lascivious nature of their album *As Nasty as They Want to Be*, with the song “Me So Horny” being singled out for particularly harsh criticism by social conservatives such as the American Family Association. The MTV generation had already been subjected to the black and white Parental Advisory stickers on albums deemed to contain explicit content since 1985 after the Recording Industry Association of America succumbed to pressure from the Parents Music Resource Center. But in Jamaica, thanks to artists such as General Echo, Shabba Ranks and King Yellowman, “Me So Horny” was a decade late on the slackness trend. The fact that the song talked openly and graphically about sex was not in any way novel to the Jamaican dancehall audience. General Echo’s *The Slackest LP* (1979)<sup>71</sup> and *12” Of Pleasure* (1980) albums with songs such as “Bathroom Sex,” “Lift Up Your Dress Fat Gal,” “Me Know Everything About She Pum Pum,” “This Are The Cockie Tribulation,” and “She Have A Pair Of Headlamp Breasts,” set the slackness standard, a standard Yellowman would meet and eventually surpass. General Echo, also known as Ranking Slackness, provided Yellowman with his most direct musical mentor. Yellowman was a cultural sponge, able to absorb musical trends both local and global and refract them back through his unique lens as an insider/outsider, hero/anti-hero. In the late

---

<sup>71</sup> This album is attributed to General Echo’s other sobriquet, Ranking Slackness.

seventies slackness happened to be the trend that he was most successful at refracting and it was the trend that carried deejays to the top of the dancehall culture

During that period some of the main popular deejays included Lone Ranger, General Echo, Rankin Joe, Trinity, Clint Eastwood and Welton Irie and each of these indulged in slackness to varying degrees. The deejay trade previous to this was set in the mould laid out by U-Roy's more cultural-minded raps, Big Youth's conscious lyrics and Rasta themed tracks, such as "I Pray Thee." Trinity was the first major deejay to anticipate the shift away from the Rastafarian-centric lyrics of his mentor, Big Youth, towards "the more material/carnal concerns of the next decade" (Barrow and Dalton 2004, 255). Of particular note is his "Three Piece Suit," which included suggestive lyrics like

Man you should have seen me and the big fat ting  
Tell you when I scrub her in a Constant Spring  
Tell you when me dub her in a Constant Spring  
Tell you when me love her in a Constant Spring  
Tell you when me dub her pon the big bed spring  
Inna me three-piece suit and ting  
—Trinity, "Three Piece Suit"

"Three Piece Suit," however, was tame by comparison of what would come next

Far from being an anomaly at dancehalls in the late seventies, slackness was big business and the largest crowds gravitated to the soundsystems that had slack deejays (Lesser 2009). But deejay culture was in its infancy as far as the recording industry was concerned, still eclipsed by singers, so it was in the dancehall that slackness remained. There were, however, soundsystems such as Jah Love Music that frowned on slackness and only played cultural songs, but the majority of soundsystems recognized that having a slack deejay was good for business. Even U-Roy's more culture-minded *Stereograph*

soundsystem had Ranking Joe, a U-Roy protégé with songs like “Cocks Man,” “Fuck In A Dance,” “Lift Up Your Frock” and “Sex Maniac”

Beth Lesser That was just the style back then, you could not do anything else Ranking Joe was [slack] and Charlie Chaplin was when he started About Ranking Joe in the late seventies, I don't think you could get anybody to go to a dance if there wasn't slackness there It wasn't slackness the whole night, it was just part of the dance (Lesser 2009)

In fact, slackness is institutionalized in Jamaican music, before General Echo and Yellowman it was usually thinly veiled using double entendre and metaphorical imagery Songs such as “Rough Rider” (Lloydie & The Lowbites), “Wreck a Buddy” (The Soul Sisters), Jacki Open (“Push Wood” and “Grinding”) and “Action Wood” (Dermot Lynch) used patois and double entendre to sing about sex, while acts like Cock & Pussy, Melinda Slack & Lee Perry and The Sexy Girls took the suggestion out of the equation Prince Buster released several slack songs but unlike Yellowman, they did not define him His musical achievements both behind and in front of the mixing board were broad, from Beatles covers, rudeboy rocksteady, chikka chikka ska, to Rastafarian-themed material Walker confirms that for his audience “Buster's appearance on sex records represented only one aspect of his multifaceted persona” (Walker 2005, 239) His slackness songs were banned from radio but through the soundsystems, jukeboxes and uptown parties they gained an underground audience<sup>72</sup> Buster had serious culture credibility too he was the producer that brought Rastafarian drummers Count Ossie into the studio for “Oh Carolina,” commonly thought to be the first recorded connection between Jamaican

---

<sup>72</sup> Until the mid-seventies American music dominated the airwaves from Jamaica's two radio stations White sees the industries denial of homegrown music as proof that radio served the elites during this period (White 1982, 38)

popular music and Rastafari, the first instance of Rastas recording on popular music and the first instance of Rastafarian music (drumming) being used in a popular song (Bradley 2001) Buster's credibility as a culture artist was further instantiated with his conversion to the Nation of Islam and his/its association with the Black Power movement Further to this, Buster's own soundsystem, Voice of the People, boasted a cultural name

While Prince Buster was one of the dominant artists making slackness records in the sixties, reggae enjoyed many sex-themed hits among fans Lee Perry produced several of these, such as "Dr Dick" Max Romeo's 1969 hit "Wet Dream" even managed to enter the British Charts, reaching the top 10, yet was banned by BBC (Walker 2005, 239) Romeo would later become better known with songs of Rastafarian and cultural import such as "War in a Babylon," "Rasta Bandwagon" and "Macabee Version" Even cultural group The Heptones had their "Fatty Fatty" banned by the radio because of perceived rudeness (Ibid) Another cultural group that sang slackness was none other than the Wailers The Wailers, held up as the epitome of roots and culture by the foreign music press, indulged in slackness in songs such as "Pussy Galore," "Stir it Up" (with its insinuating lyric "Push wood through the fire") and "Guava Jelly," among others The album cover for the Danny Sims produced *Soul Rebels* album even went so far as having a woman holding a machine gun with her shirt open to expose almost the entirety of her breasts

While the reggae industry has been traditionally patriarchal, controlled by men at all levels, there are instances of female artists who recorded slackness long before the trend became popular with Lady Saw The Rude Girls recorded a response to Prince Buster's "Wreck a Pum Pum" called "Wreck a Buddy," and Nora Dean, whose "career

seemed to be defined by slackness” with tracks like “Mojo Girl” and “Barbed Wire” (Ibid )

General Echo was the first to simply drop the double entendre and make slack lyrics explicit in the late seventies. He took the popularity of slackness in the soundsystems to a new height. But it was Yellowman, whose slackness seemingly knew no boundaries, who took it from the relative confines of the dancehall space into the public eyes and ears. When contained in the dancehall, the mainstream public were safely buffered from it, but when Yellowman became more popular than any deejay previous, and especially any slack performer, the mainstream had to notice it. First issued on live tapes of dancehall performances that were played in buses and taxis around the island, and then marketed as live sessions on vinyl such as *Feeding in the Dancehall Live at Aces*, by the turn of the decade blatant slackness had progressed from the live arena of dancehall and entered the studio where it thrived. Clint Eastwood’s *Sex Education* (1980), *Ranking Joe’s Saturday Night Jamdown Style* (1980) and Welton Irie’s *Army Life* (1982) complimented the bawdy material Yellowman was issuing at the time.

But even while Yellowman reigned as the King of Slack and shocked polite society with “Give Me Vagina,” “Cocky Did a Hurt Me” and “Wreck a Pum Pum,” there is a significant gap between Jamaican slackness and the vulgar lyrics of 2 Live Crew. While it is true that both artists would surely invite the wrath of the American Family Association, there are important differences in their sexual ethics. For instance, “Me So Horny” talks about the pleasures of oral and oral/anal sex—something a Yellowman song would never do because slackness in Jamaican dancehall only occurs within the confines of a tightly defined understanding of respectability (LaFont 2001), a respectability that

prohibits what Jamaicans term “nastiness” in the bedroom, both anal and oral sex come under this classification. Further to this, Yellowman understands sexuality from his position as a black Jamaican male, an albino and a Rastafarian. As I will show below, LaFont’s theory of creole sexuality can be applied to Yellowman to demonstrate how his sexual ethics have been informed by Victorian respectability but maintain African-derived ideologies that view sexuality as positive.

### **The Girls Dem Pet**

Well I want you to know Yellowman is the girls dem pet  
And bwoy, woman Yellowman get  
—Yellowman, “Girls Pet”

On Little Mafia, Yellowman was not only developing the skill to ride a riddim, he was also learning that humour went a long way to endearing himself to the public. His lyrics would not yet take on the full slackness style of later years but there were glimpses of what was to come. On those early soundsystems in 1977 Yellowman peppered his material with slackness. “I would say a little. Not much when I start with the soundsystems.” He did not begin as a slackness deejay, the style that he would overwhelmingly be associated with by the early eighties, but slackness pervaded the dancehall space even then, though nowhere near to the extent it does today. What he did find when sexual lyrics made their way into his set was that female audience members really like it. Women started going to the dances he was chatting at and that, of course, brought extra male patrons, “When I start [on a new] soundsystem, girls start like that sound because I talking about sex. And the girls dem would love when I talk about sex.”

So my fans was a lot of girls and the guys used to come because of the girls ”

That songs about female body parts, casual sex with several partners and the bedroom boasting of Yellowman appealed to anyone other than adolescent males may seem surprising for some readers. Certainly feminist criticism has taught us lyrics such as “give me vagina” or “want a virgin” do nothing but objectify women, reducing them to sexually submissive playthings, and ignore that they are thinking human beings with agency over their thoughts and bodies. Surely Yellowman’s slackness oppresses women everywhere by portraying them as sexual objects, who, robot-like, desire sex all the time, particularly with him. To be sure, this is a valid critique of a man whose repertoire includes lyrics like “Watch how she fat she just a bubble pon top / Inna dat me rock inna dat” (from “Love Fat Thing”)<sup>73</sup>. And, in the interest of disclosure, this is how I approached much of Yellowman’s material when I first started working on this project. But as I read the scholarly literature on dancehall and slackness, I came to understand that there are other ways to view this material and that the women who so loved his performance in the dancehall were by no means submissive or somehow lacking clear choices and agency.

In Cooper’s research I found corroboration for Yellowman’s position. She argues that outsiders often fail to recognize the pleasure many Jamaican women take in slack lyrics because when male and female deejays chat slackness they are affirming the sexual power of women (Cooper 2004, 103). Further to this she has found that some dancehall songs sung by both men and women “celebrate the economic and sexual independence of

---

<sup>73</sup> Basically a song about sex with a large woman, with “bubble” referring to the gyrating motion of intercourse and “rock inna dat” referring to vaginal penetration.

women, thus challenging the conservative gender ideology that is at the heart of both pornographic and fundamentalist conceptions of woman as commodity, virgin and whore” (Cooper 1995, 142-143)<sup>74</sup> Lady Saw, Yellowman, Buju Banton and Shabba Ranks all share large female audiences who, when asked in concerts if they want “culture or slackness,” shout slackness. What I have witnessed at Yellowman concerts validates this as well. His female fans are not turned off by songs that reduce them to body parts, nor do they see these songs as doing just that. Yellowman became the King of Dancehall because he had the largest audience and it was his slackness material—loved by both genders—that was the most popular, even when it was banned by Jamaican radio. This mistranslation as dancehall journeys from the local culture that created it and is exported around the world to be consumed by audiences removed from its social context is an example of what Cooper (2004) argues is indigenous values crossing borders and clashing with foreign sensibilities. A recent example of this is lyrics that condemn homosexual lifestyles and even promote violence against gays. For Yellowman it more often resulted in foreign critics equating his slackness with a singular message of sexism and smut.<sup>75</sup>

At the end of the day, Yellowman performed slackness for one reason—it was popular. As such, for Yellowman, slackness in the early days was just entertainment—a strategy used to build his name and reputation, win fans and sell records. For him it was also what in reggae is called “reality” lyrics<sup>76</sup> a catch-all phrase that artists use to legitimate anything from rude lyrics to gun violence in their songs. Reality lyrics usually

---

<sup>74</sup> For a detailed analysis of this see Cooper’s (2004, 73) chapter called “Slackness Personified: Representations of Female Sexuality in the Lyrics of Bob Marley and Shabba Ranks.”

<sup>75</sup> For further discussion of this see Section III Chapter 2.

<sup>76</sup> Artists such as dub poet Linton Kwesi Johnson, for instance, fall under the category reality.

connote culture or consciousness but used in this way they can blur the lines between slack and culture. For Yellowman, reality in this context means “every day,” or “ghetto-normal.” It is a way to express an aspect of the culture he lives in, and this aspect—open sexuality—is contested by the upper classes.

Yellowman: Sexual lyrics was reality and entertainment at the same time. But maybe the way how I put it sound gross to the people, some people. But it was entertainment so it didn't bother me.

Not until the nineties would Carolyn Cooper (1995) start to discuss slackness as a “metaphorical revolt” against mainstream society's Euro-Christian value system. Even now, Yellowman can agree that slackness does promote an alternative value system to the norm in Jamaica, but he insists that he was not consciously trying to do so at the time. He was merely trying to give the people what they wanted. It is my analysis after the fact, drawing on the work of Cooper (2004) and LaFont (2001), that argues that he was espousing an alternate morality rooted in Rastafari and Afro-Caribbean ideologies of sexuality, and contesting mainstream Christian values.

Yellowman's success was aided by the fact that he had a sharp wit to “dress” up slackness using humour. He singles out his sense of humour as one of the keys to entertaining an audience.

Yellowman: The people did love me and the way I do it [slackness], [and] the voice, because I used to put it in a kinda laughable way, entertainment way. Like I would say “you look pon her head it don't have no hair, between her leg it have a nine inch tear / back one sign says be good beware / of 'gina”

Brent Hagerman: So it was always funny?

Y Ya It was always funny to the people Them laugh <sup>77</sup>

Josey Wales agrees that Yellowman's use of humour went a long way to endearing him to the public and making his slackness acceptable to the masses, but in his opinion Yellowman began to take slackness to an extreme past the normal humour of his early material and of General Echo

Josey Wales Echo had more humour to his slackness, Yellow was like the Lady Saw of today Yellow sing about sex more raw than Echo Echo would sing like "Bathroom sex it carry the swing" Yellow sing, "Call me yellow, the yellow baby, put the yellow something in the Yello B" (Wales 2009)

That early sense of humour was also one of the main reasons an albino deejay could get away with a) performing on stage at all, and b) performing slackness There was always a sense that Yellowman was in on the joke that here was an albino fashioning himself as a sex symbol when everyone knows this is a ridiculous thing He played off people's fascination with the spectacle of freakishness he presented to them onstage and gradually convinced them that a dundus was not a freak, through sheer exposure, humour and the ability to bridge racial difference Today he talks about his colour as "high colour," a term that designates light skin, though it is doubtful that during his youth anyone would have associated him with lighter skinned privilege

Yellowman Because of my colour it was very fascinating to the people, like a man like me, high colour, doing that type of lyrics

BH Tell me why you did the humour

Y It was the personality Because of the colour, you know They say a guy like me with such a high colour would be doing society lyrics, like clean lyrics for the

---

<sup>77</sup> These lyrics are from the song "Dry Head Adassa," about a girl that "shaves her vagina "

uptown people But I doing it like a street, for the street Dancehall is street, just like rap, because rap comes from dancehall

Everything about Yellowman fascinated the public his rags to riches story, his pale skin colour, his sense of humour, his perseverance in the face of oppression Once he started to develop a following, more people were attracted to his shows simply to see the dundus everybody was talking about Desmond Gaynor, Yellowman's drummer since 1982 and founding member of the Sagittarius Band, remembers what it was like in those early days

Desmond Gaynor It was the first time in Jamaica we had an albino [in public] Albino was like a reject, unacceptable in human society because of his difference Any albino was seen as different He don't look the same And part of his success at the beginning was because of his uniqueness—that he was an albino And everybody wanted to see who this albino was When he started out in the dancehall, everybody went ahead of him when the hosting of the deejay thing was going on And he was the last to hold onto the mic because nobody wanted to use the mic after him

Brent Hagerman Was the audience the same way or did they treat him better?

DG Even audience had prejudice

BH Did you go to those shows?

DG I went to one or two Nobody would give him the mic and he was there up front trying to hold onto the mic and he was shoved aside And when the time came and he started doing his lyrics everybody started listening But he was still cast aside 'cause he didn't fit into the scheme of things They call him Rankin Dundus

BH Did he win over an audience?

DG Yes, he won them over because his lyrical content was different

BH How?

DG It was entertaining, it was funny He would use any simple situation and

make it hilarious And because it was funny people started listening

BH Did he poke fun at himself? Was in on the joke?

DG Yes, because he didn't have a problem with it Because fun has been poked at him since he was a child, and he accepted that 'cause he can't change it (Gaynor 2008)

Because of the colonial past in Jamaica, Jamaicans were sensitive to colour differences and treated lighter skinned people better Even though he was a black albino, he could not legitimately claim blackness in Jamaica and whiteness, of course, was also denied to him

BH Would people see Yellowman as a black man or not?

DG People have mixed feelings about that They can't identify Yellowman as a particular race, he's just an albino (Ibid )

Race and colour were social constructions that were constantly reified throughout Yellowman's life Names like "whiteman," "yellowman," "redboy" reinforced that he stood outside of the mainstream blackness Even today, he does not identify as a specific racial category, preferring to trump categories based on colour with humanity "I consider myself both [black and white] Most of my audience is white and black and Hispanic I wouldn't look at a white man and say 'I'm white' or a black man and say 'I'm black ' I'm a man, I'm for the people, I love the people "

## CHAPTER 6

### The Deejay Trade

#### Every Deejay Want To Win

By 1979 the deejay trade was beginning to make international inroads. Trinity's *Shanty Town Determination* and *Three Piece Suit* helped spread the talk-over gospel beyond Jamaica's shoreline and Michigan & Smiley's *Rub A Dub Style* laid the foundation for the two deejay combination that would work so well for Yellowman and Fathead a few years later. But the biggest star of the deejay scene at that time was Studio One's Lone Ranger. Lone Ranger was part of Coxone Dodd's last great surge of talent in the late seventies, before he moved his operations to New York. Dodd, who had been one of the top producers from ska's advent into the early seventies, was losing ground to other studios, particularly Channel One, which churned out hit after hit in the deejay and dancehall styles. Dodd fought back with a clutch of records in the burgeoning dancehall style by Johnny Osbourne (*Truths and Rights*), Freddie McGregor (*Bobby Babylon*), Michigan & Smiley (*Rub A Dub Style*) and most notably Lone Ranger (*On The Other Side Of Dub*).

#### Lone Ranger

Lone Ranger (b. Anthony Waldron) was the resident deejay on Virgo Hi-Fi. His humorous lyrics and penchant for injecting scatological noises such as *rybit*, *onk* or *bim* would be picked up by others, especially Eek-A-Mouse, Yellowman and Fathead. He and General Echo did more than any other deejay previous to Yellowman to shift the focus of

reggae away from “the cultural chants of the mid-seventies, as exemplified by Big Youth, to pure eighties dancehall chat” (Barrow and Dalton 2004, 255) Bradley (2001) argues that Lone Ranger’s new style was adopted from his British upbringing where he would have witnessed deejays such as Clint Eastwood & General Saint, Papa Levi, Peter King and Tippa Irie on soundsystems such as Front Line International and Saxon. The British deejay style put more emphasis on entertaining a crowd and altered the delivery of the lyrics by speeding them up. The widespread influence this new style had on dancehall in the eighties reflected the “liberating atmosphere of eighties dancehall [where] it was remembered that the primary purpose of going out was to enjoy yourself” (Bradley 2001, 506)

Just as General Echo paved the way for Yellowman’s slackness, Lone Ranger opened the doors of a new era of music that celebrated good times and proved that there was an international audience ready and willing to get behind the new music called dancehall. Yellowman is considered the deejay that popularized dancehall globally, but Lone Ranger had made important international strides before this. Yellowman would learn from Lone Ranger, even adopting much of the deejay’s stylistic and thematic oeuvre, and open up dancehall to legions of fans around the globe.

### **Yellowman Steps Up**

Yellowman spent the late seventies at the sidelines of dancehall, attempting to break in to the culture and develop as an artist and entertainer. In the months after he began at Little Mafia in 1977, he began to troll the soundsystems on a nightly basis,

asking if he could perform and building his name. Initial hesitation eventually gave way to consent as Yellowman developed a reputation. That he had talent was not in question, but as he gained experience and absorbed influences from other deejays, Yellowman's repertoire of lyrics, vocal styles, jokes, and antics quickly grew. Perhaps one reason Yellowman was able to rise to the top and remain a popular deejay for so long was that he had a versatility rarely seen at that point. Today, for instance, Buju Banton can easily slip between singing a roots reggae song, deejaying a reality lyric in his gravelly rock-stone style or mashing up a dance with a slackness tune. But in the late seventies deejays more often stuck to one or two styles. Yellowman was able to mimic the slower rootsier style of older deejays like Big Youth but also chat quicker like the Brits. Whereas pioneers like U-Roy excelled at interjecting short lyrical bursts in between vocal lines, General Echo and Lone Ranger added narrative to deejay lyrics, telling full blown stories and developing narrative arcs over several songs. Yellowman took this and became adept at the practice. His "Married in the Morning" or "Mr Chin" drew on cultural tropes that every Jamaican knew and understood and weaved them into humorous stories. It is no wonder these songs have remained two of his most loved. Yellowman also peppered his sets with alternate vocal styles. He claims to be the first deejay to introduce a sung chorus into a deejay track. He built up a repertoire of American R&B, soul and country and western songs that he would extemporaneously break into amidst a deejay set. Yellowman's song "Love Struck" is built on the melody and lyrics of Ray Charles' "Hallelujah, I Love Her So." Crowds went wild when he sang Sam Cook's "Bring it on Home," which he did in several of his recorded tracks.

He could also dip into the rock-stone voice, turn around and chat in a sweet lighter

voice or interject Lone Ranger-style scats like “bim,” “bong” or “brrrrring ” Yellowman was conscious too of not being contained within one genre Many deejays, for instance, only chatted Rasta-centric material, just as many singers only sang love songs Yellowman crafted his talent in such a way as to foster versatility and his repertoire shows this The guiding agenda behind this was simple Yellowman wanted to please, he desperately wanted a fanship, and he wanted to belong Growing up anathema, an outsider, shunned and scorned had a profound effect on him psychologically He longed to be the centre of attention and would do anything to achieve that

### **Tastee Talent Contest**

Yellowman’s big break came in 1979 at the newly established Tastee Talent Contest Initiated by the Tastee Patty company, the talent search has become the island’s leading talent competition with semi-final events every two months and a grand finale once a year The prize was \$50,000 and twelve dozen patties but besides the food and money it was the prestige that came with winning that helped make his name When Yellowman entered the semi-finals held at Crossroads, it was only the second stage show he had been on Dressed in all yellow clothes that had become his trademark, he did well because, he says, he had name recognition in the dancehall community by that time He had been building a reputation in Barbican and had spent time going around to other soundsystems to build his name By his own memory, he slaughtered the competition during the semi-finals singing the song, “Me Kill Barnie “ (also called “Barnabus Killing”) “That was the theme song that mash up the place ” The song was an answer to

### Lone Ranger's "Barnabus Collins "

Owen Robinson, aka Willa, would later become Yellowman's driver In 1979, however, he had never met the deejay but had seen him walking along Slipe Road dressed in his yellow hat and suit and heard people calling to him—some with favourable greetings and other with derisions The first time Willa saw him perform was at the free Crossroads event for Tastees "It was awesome, it sound very good, and everybody cheer and everybody seem to love him His voice was very powerful and his lyrics was good I said to myself this guy is going to go places" (Robinson 2009) During the finals held in Halfway Tree, Yellowman came in second, beat out by Nadine Sutherland The added publicity, however, would soon pay off

This whole time, however, Yellowman kept it a secret that he lived at Eventide He would not have to keep that secret much longer In the audience at the Tastee competition was the man who would transport Yellowman from playing small neighbourhood sounds or one-off nights on larger sounds like Gemini or Virgo, or alongside General Echo at Stereophonic, to travelling all around the island with a formidable Hi-Fi called Black Scorpio The man who runs Black Scorpio is tall and imposing but his sense of humour and ludic play make it easy to see why Maurice Johnson and Yellowman got along so well

### **Black Scorpio**

In the late seventies and eighties the established soundsystems all had their regular deejays Lone Ranger was on Soul to Soul, Josey Wales and Charlie Chaplin were on U-

Roy's sound, Stur Gav, Brigadier Jerry deejayed on Jah Love, Welton Irie chatted on Virgo, Bobby Culture was on Jack Ruby, Papa Ritchie was on Studio 54, Admiral Bailey and Chaka Demus were on King Jammys, General Trees and Sassafras were on Black Scorpio, Supercat and Ninjaman were on Killamantaro, Ringo was on Gemini, Tiger was on Black Star (Chamberlain 2007) This gave deejays steady work and as their popularity grew, their affiliated sound's fortunes grew with them. At this point in his life, Yellowman was still bouncing from sound to sound, trying to gain exposure, win popularity with the masses and impress the owners of the sounds enough to give him a full time gig.

After the Tastee Talent competition exposure, Yellowman went to see Maurice Johnson, aka Jack Scorpio, and asked him for a chance to deejay on Johnson's Black Scorpio sound. Johnson, impressed with the youth's win at Tastees, agreed. When Yellowman started deejaying on Black Scorpio alongside Sassafras and General Trees, Black Scorpio was a big sound. Scorpio remembers Yellowman coming to his sound, "when he come to me he still looking fe bust. I think I may have had him before Tastees." And, according to him, he gave Yellowman his first big break. "I personally start the real career of that youth [Yellow]. I buy him first Yellow suit he ever wear in him life" (Johnson 2009).

But even as his popularity grew, Yellowman still had to deal with dissatisfaction from his peers, who were none too pleased that a newcomer was getting most of the attention. "Yellowman was a star from day I see him, you know," remembers Scorpio, who admits that Sassafras and General Trees were jealous of this. Worse still, deejays from competing sounds would lash out at Yellowman for his colour during sound clashes. Ironically, for a man whose colour kept him out of the music industry originally, it was

now being seen by some as a simply a gimmick that Yellowman used to further his career. One of the most famous incidents of fellow deejays both attacking Yellowman for his albinism and suggesting that it was his colour, not his talent, that was the cause of his fame, was at a dance held at Skateland between Black Scorpio and Jack Ruby's H1-F1. It was here that top deejay Nicodemus called Yellowman a "dundus bwoy" on stage.<sup>78</sup>

### **Superstar Yellowman**

The Skateland clash made Yellowman a star. Black Scorpio was on the road every weekend touring to every corner of Jamaica with Yellowman, Sassafrass and General Trees in tow and the crowds were getting larger and larger. Fame had finally hit for Yellowman and everybody wanted to see him and hear him. When Yellowman was due to play at a dance, crowds would gather outside the gates waiting for his arrival, not wanting to be fooled by an unscrupulous promoter trying to draw crowds by falsely advertising a celebrity's name. The car or van containing the star would pull up slowly to the gates and drive passed the crowd. When the fans saw he was there, they would rush the gates at once, sometimes breaking them (Barkley 2009). On one particular night Black Scorpio's crew arrived at the venue and the street was thick with fans who proceeded to surround the van. Scorpio was driving. Everybody wanted a glimpse of Yellowman. The throng of people was so powerful, though, that the sheer force of bodies pressing against the vehicle turned the van over on its side, pinning the artists and soundmen inside, unable to open the doors. The van had to be righted before the musicians could exit. Soon, Jack

---

<sup>78</sup> For more on this clash see Section III Chapter 3

would enlist bodyguards to protect Yellowman when he arrived at a concert

Yellowman could literally stop traffic in downtown Kingston. Producer Philip “Fatis” Burrell told me that Yellowman could park his BMW at Crossroads in Kingston and the whole place stood still. “No one else could do that, not even now” (Burrell 2009)

Josey Wales: I don’t think Bob [Marley] had that great respect in those budding years like Yellow had when he stepped to the music. Deejay reggae was just busting out [It was] something exciting and new, so here comes this guy who looks different, and talk that get out of order. The people appreciated him then as the king, he always reflects on his background and where he comes from. People think, “Oh God, if a guy can bring it from rags to riches, this is a good pattern to follow.” And Jamaican people like to follow good patterns [They] respected him for overcoming all his struggles in his life. To become so successful that people run and bawl and crave and grab and photograph—the paparazzi was all over him, and so was the kids in the ghetto. Everywhere he walks people would follow him all over, kids, whatever. People bun up them dinner ‘cause Yellow outside—“let me see him lord, let me touch him”—he fascinates the people’s minds and their musical taste buds. At that time Jamaica and the world was ready for this. And I don’t think you’ll see another one like him. Shabba came this close. Make it bigger in terms of Grammy and all that, but the dent Yellow [made] and the footprint sank deep into the minds of reggae fans. Yellow did that. (Wales 2009)

Yellowman’s fame meant that Scorpio had to construct a stage for him to stand on so the crowd could watch him. One night Yellowman told the crowd that he wanted all the young aspiring deejays to join him on stage, so many answered the call that the stage collapsed. A new sturdier version had to be constructed. No longer could the deejays simply stand beside the selector, they were now raised above the crowd, making the dance become more like a stage show and further bridging the gaps between the dancehall space and the live music concert. As Yellowman’s popularity grew he was innovative in finding ways to make dancehall—as a music genre, a culture and a space—more like live band culture.

Scorpio's relationship with Yellowman goes above and beyond the other producer/artist partnerships Yellowman had over the years. Yellowman's eighties material can almost be cleanly divided into three groups. Jo Jo Hookim recorded his first three LPs at Channel One, Junjo Lawes largely dominated Yellowman's 1983-85 material, and George Phang released three albums with him in 1985. Each of these producers worked with Yellowman intensely for a short period of time. But Scorpio, who did not produce a record for Yellowman until 1988's *Life in the Ghetto*, has continued intermittently to release Yellowman albums ever since. More amazing is the fact that he and Yellowman have continued working together after Yellowman was stolen away from Black Scorpio on two separate occasions by business men that would be able to offer Yellowman more money and greater exposure. The second occasion was after a soundsystem clash between Black Scorpio and Jack Ruby Hi-Fi at Skateland. Budding dancehall producer Henry "Junjo" Lawes had already established himself with Barrington Levy and it was Levy who introduced Yellowman to Lawes, thereby effectively robbing Scorpio of the opportunity to bolster his own producing career. Before this was to take place, however, Scorpio would suffer an even greater blow, one that would relegate his soundsystem temporarily to the background.

### **Aces International**

One night in 1980 Jack travelled with his Black Scorpio crew to dance east of Kingston in the parish of St. Thomas, unaware that this night would go down in dancehall history. A dance outside of the island's few urban centres was sure to eclipse any other

entertainment options and sure enough, this Black Scorpio dance was the biggest show in town with everybody anticipating the arrival of Yellowman. The dance was a rousing success with so many patrons rushing the gates to hear and see Yellowman that the police had to “lock it off,” or shut it down around midnight. Jack jokes that this was probably the biggest event ever to happen in St. Thomas. “Police and soldier curfew a dance, they lock we off, lock off our sound” (Johnson 2009). This was considered the country, and unlike Kingston, there would only be one sound playing, and then only on the weekends. Yellowman’s reasoning on why the dance was shut down was because of the range of patrons. “you see [in] that area, one of the reason why they curfew the dance, they know say everybody going come—badman, everybody,” so to stop trouble before it started, the police sent the revelers home (Ibid). When word got around that the show was shut down because of the audience capacity, a big change was afoot.

Willa worked for Aces International as a box man at the time.<sup>79</sup> He remembers the events of that night well.

Willa: I was with the sound Aces, working with them. And the Saturday night Black Scorpio was at a dance in St. Thomas and we were playing in Port Morant. And that night our dance was flopping because everybody gone down to Black Scorpio because they heard Yellowman is down there mashing up the place.

Brent Hagerman: So you didn’t go?

W: No. And then I heard that the police mash up the dance, 1, 2 o’clock and search up everybody and raid it and everybody have to leave, lock it off. In the morning the news is going around so our boss, Jimmy Wynter, ask us to go down and check with him [Yellowman] because we were having a session at his place the Sunday night. So we go down there and talk to him and he come with us. So we take him to a club, the boss give him a room, food everything. And in the night when the session start, a lot of people mash down, a lot of people come into listen to this Yellowman. The dance ram. A lot of money make. A lot of money.

---

<sup>79</sup> A youth who helped set up and tear down the speakers.

BH And how much did Jimmy Wynter offer to pay Yellowman?

W \$1000 No, Jimmy ask him how much him charge and Yellowman say \$1000 so Jimmy give him \$1500

BH And that was a lot of money back then for a deejay

W Ya man, '80, '81, A lot of money At the time I was making \$20, pulling box and helping around the sound (Robinson 2009)

Aces at that time had no resident deejay so it was a coup for Wynter not only to hire a deejay with a draw, but to snatch one of the island's top deejays away from a big Kingston Hi-Fi<sup>80</sup> Wynter owned a bar called Luz Night Club and his soundsystem, Aces, played there every Sunday night At the time Jack was paying Yellowman \$800 JA a night, by his own admission Jack says "a whole heap a money that" (Johnson 2009) At \$800 a night Yellowman was making good money, but the \$1500<sup>81</sup> that Wynter would pay him was phenomenal For the man who had to prove himself before he could ever sing a syllable into a microphone, Yellowman's talents and notoriety had finally secured him an enviable position in the industry that should have been out of his reach as an albino

Jack Scorpio was understandably angry that Wynter had stolen his star but, according to Yellowman and Jack, he understood what was at stake

Jack Yellowman come to me and say, "Bwoy Scorpio, Jimmy waan me fe come chat his sound" (Ibid)

Jack could not match Wynter's offer and knew Yellowman had to go where the money

---

<sup>80</sup> Hi-Fi is another word for soundsystem

<sup>81</sup> Yellowman remembers this figure as \$2000

was He had lost his “crowd puller” but Yellowman’s deal with Wynter was not exclusive so Jack would still benefit from Yellowman’s presence on his sound occasionally However angry he was back then, today Jack sees the event in perspective “Yellowman need a break too, you know I had Sassafras, General Trees, they had a name too I had two deejay already and Aces didn’t never have none” (Ibid ) The fact that Yellowman and Scorpio would reunite several times to make albums together over the next few decades shows that the feelings between them could not have been too ignoble

Willa, like countless youths who follow sounds around, was a low level all around gopher doing whatever Jimmy Wynter or Aces’ two selectors, Shaggy and Stereo, needed done Besides setting up equipment and running the wires, Willa sometimes got the chance to play records when the Stereo or Shaggy needed a break “Sometimes [Stereo] met a lady and wanted to dance, he’d allow me to take the selection He’d pick them out for me So I just play, I just put them on the turntable and me and Shaggy might tune it up, you know” (Robinson 2009) But with Yellowman now taking a lead role at the sound, Willa’s job description would change and he would spend the eighties at the side of the world’s top deejay

Yellowman had no car or license, partly due to the fact that his eyesight has always been poor, a condition associated with albinism Today, Yellowman has to squint to read and when one of his three cellular phones rings he has to hold it close to his eyes to read the screen Bright lights frustrate this condition making driving, particularly at night after a show, impossible Yet a car-less musician in Kingston, a city with a well serviced public transportation system, is not a rarity when Sly Dunbar was a busy session drummer in the mid-seventies he was known for taking a taxi everywhere he

went People joked about it so much he named his subsequent record label Taxi (Dunbar 2006) Jamaicans of all stripes take a variety of forms of public and private transport rather than negotiate the hectic and dangerous roads both of the nation's capital and the country Route taxis, in my experience the most exhilarating and dangerous form of getting from one place to another, abound, as do buses and minibuses For Yellowman, though, private public transportation—hired taxis—were too expensive and public forms—buses, route taxis, minivans—had too many prying eyes He used to walk everywhere, to avoid uncomfortable jeering “A lot of people never like me, you know, so I try to keep out of them way, keep out of public ”

But as Yellowman's musical stature grew, being out in public became not only bearable but fun “after Spanish Jar, Tastees, Little Mafia, that's when the public thing come in Start get used to public, because of the music, why people like and respect me ” And a star needed private transportation As such, Willa's job description was augmented to include driver, taking over the job eventually from Stereo He first used Wynter's Datsun 510 or Triumph, and later rental cars before Yellowman owned his yellow BMW, made famous in the cover artwork for the album *Just Cool* Willa was in charge of getting Yellowman to and from each show, and his first order of duty was to take him home to Kingston after he performed that first show on Aces For Yellowman, though, this would prove tricky as he did not want Aces—or anyone for that matter—to know that he lived in the poor house

Willa The first Sunday he worked for us we took him back to Kingston We said, “where do you live?” He said, “just leave me at the stop light by the bakery, right by Tropical Tatta ” We were going to play the following Friday so him said, “come back here and pick me up here about 2 o'clock ” He was living at Eventide, poorhouse, but he didn't want to tell us that (Robinson 2009)

Willa knew where Yellowman lived however, but he kept the secret. He used to work on Slipe Pen Road and was used to seeing the albino walking around the area in his yellow tracksuit. When he saw him walking out of the parking lot of Eventide one day, he figured out where Yellowman lived.

With Yellowman at the helm Aces International was quickly transformed into the number one sound on the island with people flocking to hear the albino on the mic, quite a feat for a country sound. Previous to this Aces had no regular deejay but everywhere they went aspiring deejays would take turns on the mic. The singer that most often was with them was Jah Rubel. The deejay travelled all over the island chatting his lyrics, which by now had become notably slacker. With so much travelling it was not always possible to get Yellowman back to Kingston after each show. In these cases Yellowman would be put up in a hotel and Willa and the others would sleep on the speaker boxes in the car. A few weeks after Yellowman started chatting on Aces, he would move out of Eventide and live with friends in Franklin Town. Breaking out of the poor house was something he desperately had wanted to do, but it would come on heels of a terrible tragedy at the home.

### **Eventide Home Is Burning Down**

Why do the wicked man a pressure the poor man?  
Eventide Home is burning down  
Me couldn't stand the pressure

—Yellowman, “Even Tide Fire”<sup>82</sup>

The fire that occurred at Eventide on the morning of May 20, 1980 was tragic, 153 women lost their lives, making this the worst loss of life in a fire in Jamaican history. At the time of the fire there were 700 residents. The Master of the Home, David E Dunkley, complained that the institution was plagued with financial problems resulting in underpaid staff who often lacked sufficient training resulting in poor living conditions for the residents (Dunkley 2005). But worse than this was the political climate in Jamaica in the spring of 1980 leading to the general election that would prove to be Jamaica’s bloodiest to date. Eventide had already been the victim of politically motivated violence and some felt that the fire was just the latest in these events. They blamed JLP supporters for the arson in what was an ever increasing civil war between the parties.

One opinion on the cause of the fire argued that it was the result of political maneuvering during the final months leading up to the most violent general elections in Jamaica’s recent history. There were in fact a number of reports to the police from persons living at the home that gunmen had entered the premises more than once, claiming they had come to kill the staff and inmates for reasons connected with their alleged political affiliations. Moreover, gunmen besieged the premises of the Home just six months after the fire and this time injured two persons. One of them, Mr Harold Tefler, a meal van driver for the Home, was stabbed and then beaten while unloading the meal van. The other victim of this recent attack on the Home was a 63 year old female resident, Miss Vera Wynter. Miss Wynter was sitting on the veranda “taking in a little fresh air” she said, when the gunmen opened fire on the premises hitting her several times (Ibid).

Yellowman remembers gunmen descending on Eventide, and gangsters showing up with guns tucked in their waist in order to intimidate the residents. The area was a PNP stronghold and JLP supporters would be scared into voting for the PNP. Perhaps

---

<sup>82</sup> The song title is often listed as two words “Even Tide ”

recognizing the role political violence played in the fire Prime Minister Michael Manley named the day the women were laid to rest in a mass grave inside National Heroes Park, May 26, 1980, a day of National Mourning (Ibid )

The fire broke out in the women's ward and was contained there so Winston was not physically harmed. He did witness the fire, however and was somewhat traumatized by seeing the women die. During the seventies and eighties Kingston in an election year was a bloody place to be and so the teenager was already used to seeing death. "I see people killed, shoot down back in eighties when the politics was on a rampage by police and bad boys." It affected him to the point that sometimes he stayed off the streets. Even now, he only goes out of his house on business or when it is important.

The Eventide fire was a blessing in disguise for Winston as it finally allowed him to throw off the shackles of institutional living. "I don't even know if they looked for me," he says today, "since they hated me so much [They were] just glad to get rid of me." Today he says of the fire, somewhat jokingly, "That's how I break out." He would move in with friends in Franklin Town for the time being but his anger at the senselessness of the tragedy was recorded at the time. Under the name Yellowman he would make his first record titled "Even Tide Fire" only one month after the calamity.

The opportunity to record arose when an independent producer from Winston's old neighbourhood of Chisholm Avenue named Leon Synmoie heard him singing at Eventide. Leon used to visit Eventide to see his babymother—literally the unwed mother of his baby—and on one of these trips he heard Winston singing with some friends. Leon worked with Alvin Ranglin's GG Records but produced artists independently as well. By this time Yellowman was starting to build a small name for himself in Barbican. Leon

attended dances and hung around soundsystems, always with his ear to the ground sniffing out new talent. Leon took the chance to record Winston, renting studio time at Byron Lee's Dynamic Sound and arranged to use Lloyd Campbell's riddim "Let Me Tell You Boy" for the deejay to voice over. Yellowman had been turned away from this studio before but since Leon was renting it, the owner had no problem over who used it. It was Yellowman's first time in the studio and he became frustrated trying to adapt to the new surroundings. Used to making up lyrics on the spot in the heat of a dancehall show, the sterility of the studio with no audience or other artists to feed off took its toll.

"I was nervous," he says of the session. "Now I do a song in 10 minutes, but that song I take like an hour to finish." To anyone used to recording studios, an hour to voice one song is still a very quick recording pace. But Jamaican artists at that time, especially ones with money and studio time constraints, were used to recording live off the floor. Yellowman became known for his speed in the studio, able to voice an entire album in one day. The fact that he was ashamed of his elongated performance on "Even Tide Fire" suggests that an hour was considered a long time.

"Even Tide Fire" failed to register as a hit for Yellowman either on the radio or in the dancehalls, the song was only a minor single but it served two functions. First, it allowed Yellowman to make the transition from soundsystem deejay to recording artist. Distributed by Byron Lee's brother, Neville Lee, through his company Sonic Sound, the single probably received no airplay but it did manage to help further instantiate the name Yellowman on Kingston's dancehall scene. Second, the man that would become known for lyrics about pleasure, partying and sex started his recording career with an undeniable reality song. By this time Yellowman says he was doing "pure slackness" in the

dancehalls yet his lyrics on this song speak to the atrocity of the loss of life, offering searing social commentary and presenting salient critiques of a system where the poor are left to burn. Cultural songs in reggae can come in many forms—religious, Afrocentric, and social commentary are the main three, with social commentary often being extended to include reality lyrics—lyrics that may not directly call for social justice and equality but do so implicitly through their use of ghetto narratives that show the sharp divide between black and white or rich and poor. “Even Tide Fire” was a reality lyric because it described a very real event. It also critiqued Jamaica’s classist society. At first he asks in the song “Why do the wicked man a pressure the poor man?”, a thinly veiled attack on the political thugs that both parties employed to do their bidding. The song then dispels any rumor that this was accidental: “Eventide fire it a murder.”

There is also a sign here to tell us that Yellowman was being influenced by Rasta culture at this time. He praises the fire brigade who put out the fire by saying, “Jah Jah bless all the fireman.” This allusion to Jah in Yellowman’s first recorded song is important. By his own admission he did not write his first Rastafarian song until 1982<sup>83</sup> but it is obvious that at least the lexicon, if not the teachings, of Rastafari had already influenced him. His trademark vitriol for Christianity, found later in songs such as “Fools go to Church on Sunday,” is also present here. After lamenting that 153 lost their lives in the fire he says, “All who still alive pray to Jesus Christ and gwaan<sup>84</sup> a church,” making sure to use a guttural mocking tone on “gwaan,” to enforce the futility of the church. Like much of his later material the line between seriousness and humour is shaky at best. It is

---

<sup>83</sup> He has variously said the first Rasta song is either “Jah Made us for a Purpose” or “Jah Jah are we Guiding Star.”

<sup>84</sup> Literally “Go on.”

hard to tell if he is being serious or laughing at the expense of the infirmed when he rhymes the verse “Some of dem sick dem couldn’t move quick / Some of dem blind dem never have no time / Some of dem dumb but the whole of dem bun ”<sup>85</sup>

Musically the song also signifies an important step for both dancehall and Yellowman. He voices the chorus using the melody of “London Bridge” (“Eventide is burning down, burning down, burning down”). Paul Gilroy (1987) has criticized Yellowman for using nursery rhymes, saying that this has led to the de-evolution of reggae. Yet other singers such as Max Romeo and Jacob Miller had already used nursery rhymes and children’s songs to great effect (“Three Blind Mice” and “The Ants Come Marching” respectively) but Yellowman was quickly establishing a style that was heretofore unheard of for deejays. He was alternating between singing a chorus and chatting a verse. Deejays and singers at this point were separate entities so for Yellowman to take on both roles was an anomaly.

## **Franklin Town**

Now that Yellowman was out of Eventide he still was not really on his own. He moved in with friends in the PNP garrison of Franklin Town at 4 York Road for the period of about six months. Today, walking around Franklin Town you get the sense that this is a close knit community. Unlike Concrete Jungle there are no concrete high rises, only small wooden or stone houses with zinc fences and roofs. The streets are narrow— one car width—and the pavement is littered with trash and potholes. It seems as though

---

<sup>85</sup> “Bun” means burn

the government forgets these areas Telephone poles have nests of wires stretching from them to nearby houses—those that cannot afford electricity simply take it Gullies run like veins throughout Kingston—depositories for rainwater, sewage water, plastic bags, old refrigerators and numerous other trash items The gully in Franklin town was small but still stank I associate that smell with the ghetto—the smell of grey water trickling down the crack between the sidewalk and the road Here Yellowman lived in a small house with several other people They shared a yard with a house behind where a deejay called Ringo lived He was also known as a slackness deejay and released an album called *Two Coxmen* He was on an album *Superstar Yellowman has Arrived With Toyan* covering Yellowman's hit "Getting Married," and also released a popular slack song called "Two Lesbian Hitch "

## CHAPTER 7

### Spiritual Awakening

Religiously speaking there are three dominant eras in Yellowman's life his early religious instruction, both Protestant and Catholic, at orphanages in which he lived, his conversion to Rastafari in the late seventies, and a period starting in and around 1984 where he underwent a life-change brought on by a brush with death While he would never use the term "conversion" to describe his slow journey to self-realization that he is a Rasta, Yellowman did indeed move from considering himself a Christian to finally calling himself a Rasta During the late seventies Yellowman was affected by time spent at Bob Marley's compound at 56 Hope Road in New Kingston Introduced to the Marley circle by Wailers bassist Aston "Familyman" Barrett, Yellowman came in contact with many practicing Rastas at the compound where he sat and listened to reasonings and absorbed the Ital lifestyle of those around him<sup>86</sup> The house was a gathering space for musicians and Rastas in the community and was a hub of activity in the late seventies He became intrigued by the Rastafari worldview, marking what I call the second phase in his religious life, and began to make changes to his lifestyle accordingly

It may seem strange to some that Yellowman and Marley not only knew each other, but Yellowman was welcomed at Marley's home and had a good relationship with his family<sup>87</sup> Yellowman remembers playing with the Marley kids often, to the point of

---

<sup>86</sup> Ital referring to "natural," Ital can encompass Rastafarian culture by through diet, lifestyle or speech

<sup>87</sup> In Section III Chapter 2 I discuss how Yellowman has been represented as being the opposite of Bob Marley by many journalists and scholars Whereas Marley in this equation represents an Afrocentric and Rastafarian cultural agenda, both musically and lyrically, Yellowman is understood to stand for sex,

wanting to avoid them at times because they always begged him to sing to them

Yellowman I used to go to Bob's studio on Hope Road, play around with Bob  
Bob used to say certain thing that I like He used to run joke and call me a white  
man, you know

Brent Hagerman He didn't have any problems with you being a slack deejay?

Y No man, no man Because Bob used to sing song called "push wood" ["Stir it  
Up"] and Bend Down Low and all those things I am coming around like Bob  
now, doing clean X-rated songs, you know?<sup>88</sup>

BH Have you reinvented yourself more in image as Marley the last while?

Y Ya, that type of image that people would look up on you as a normal man that  
trying to push the message in many different ways Bob sing love songs, Bob sing  
liberation songs, roots culture songs, message songs

BH Is he your favourite artist?

Y Ya man, up til now

BH Bob's mother had no problem with slackness?

Y No, 'cause actually she is the one who let Bob know me She used to love and  
respect me Sometime I go to studio but most of the time I go where she at Even  
when I go to studio and talking to Bob, when evening time come and school get  
over I used to try to leave before Ziggy and Stephen and Cedella come because if  
they come and see me they make me sing They wouldn't let me stop singing,  
they make me sing on and on I used to tell Bob, say, "I going over to your  
mother, I going to see Miss Booker" So I go and hide from Ziggy and them over  
there

Yellowman cites that period of his life as the time when he first was introduced to  
Rastafari in any great depth He had friends who were Rastas, and remained a  
sympathizer or supporter since his days with Windy at Maxfield Park, but had never

---

partying and materialism, and eighties dancehall music is conceived of as a de-evolution of the superior  
seventies roots reggae

<sup>88</sup> "Clean X-rated songs" for Yellowman mean songs about sex that are not vulgar because they employ  
double entendre, or "clean" words

really taken the time to listen to the ideological and political reasonings of the dreads  
 This would be possible at 56 Hope Road with large numbers of Rastafarians hanging out  
 at any given time

Yellowman At that time I tried to be that religion I start with [Marley] and a lot  
 more Rasta friends They always talking about Rasta and you been around them  
 almost any day and you hear that sing in your ears, you know? So it grow on me

Brent Hagerman What would they talk about?

Y They talk about Africa, Ethiopia, Selassie and they talk about things that you not  
 supposed to do like eat certain meat

Yellowman was influenced greatly by the Rasta vibe there, and by Bob in particular  
 who lived strictly by the tenets of Rastafari Like many Rastas, Yellowman never joined a  
 “house” or attended a meeting He simply learned about the religion through friends like  
 Familyman, Marley and Joseph Hill He decided to make some life style changes  
 immediately, tellingly, slackness would not be one of them Instead he cut beef out of his  
 diet, stopped going to strip clubs and changed the language he used to speak about  
 women, being careful not to use words such as “bitch ” Later, in 1984, he would reflect  
 on his dietary change

Natty naw nyam cattle natty naw nyam dirt  
 He come from the planet of earth  
 He come from the planet of earth  
 Granny in the kitchen cook rice and chicken  
 The dread outta door, he cook ital stew  
 No trouble granny granny never trouble you  
 Natty cook up him ital stew<sup>89</sup>

—Yellowman, “Nobody Move”

---

<sup>89</sup> Many Rastas are vegetarian, therefore ital stew is vegetarian stew “Nyam” is patois for “to eat ”

This also overlaps with the time when Yellowman was beginning to distance himself from violence. Known for fighting at Eventide Home and even carrying a gun, he perceived Rastafari livity as peaceful and tolerant.<sup>90</sup> When I asked him what he gave up when he became a Rasta, his first response was “badness” “Rastas is people who are not violent and we don’t discriminate against people or religions (February 20, 2009). A decade after this change, in 1990, he was asked to play the part of the Rastafarian in the Steven Seagal film *Marked for Death*, but refused as he felt the role wrongly portrayed Rastas as violent and criminal-minded and confused the religion with Obeah.

Yellowman always insists that lyrics about sex—slackness—are not inconsistent with Rastafarian lifestyle and as such he had no reason for changing his lyrics at that time. He would tone down his slackness periodically over the course of his career, but for now, Yellowman began to see the world from a Rastafarian point of view, and that included, for him at least, the use of slackness.

Not yet a self-identified Rasta, Yellowman does say that he began to have an awareness of God that came from both his experience with Rastas at 56 Hope Road and his church experience growing up. This led to Yellowman altering the way he interpreted his role in life. Gradually his clothing would start to exhibit red, gold and green colours, his album covers were often decorated with Rasta related symbols and his stage shows included call and response sections to the audience where Yellowman would utter “Jah” and the audience would reply “Rastafari.”<sup>91</sup> As Yellowman gradually began calling himself as a Rasta he realized that he was now a role model to the youth and felt

---

<sup>90</sup> Livity: nature living, living according to Rastafari precepts.

<sup>91</sup> This call and response is characteristic of many reggae shows, regardless of whether the artist self-identifies as Rasta.

compelled to include positive and cultural messages in his music

When Yellowman started touring outside Jamaica and realized the extent of his fan base, he felt more of a responsibility to them. He felt the power of his position as an entertainer—people listened to his lyrics, his points of view, his ideas. Increasingly his lyrics took on typical conscious themes and even when they were blatantly slack they often would still have a social message. Sometimes this would be in regards to correct morality, as in “Galong Galong Galong.” Other times it would present itself as ways to purify the body or avoid disease (“Condom”)<sup>92</sup>

By 1982 Yellowman had begun to include references to Jah in his lyrics and Yellowman’s lyrics have taken on a religious slant on and off ever since. To reiterate, this is not to say that he ever turned his back on slack lyrics, instead he added religious or cultural lyrics to his repertoire and included them beside his better known overt slack material.

As Yellowman’s fame grew and the opportunities for touring grew, he found himself on the road with several Rastafarian musicians, notably, Black Uhuru, Culture, Mighty Diamonds and the Congos. His time with them would reinforce the positive representations of Rastafari he witnessed at 56 Hope Road and help him to clarify his own religious views, which were becoming a mix of Jamaican Christianity and Rastafari. The fact that he was even on the road with these bands is interesting in itself. In an era when few deejays were popular enough to tour outside of Jamaica, Yellowman could be found on stages throughout the Caribbean, Europe, North and South America and Africa. International audiences would see him alongside roots reggae bands at festivals and so

---

<sup>92</sup> See Section III Chapter 3 for an in-depth discussion of this

the divide between dancehall and roots reggae, or slackness and culture, was never as instantiated among his international fan base as the press have made it out to be

Today Yellowman's international audience sees him as a carrier of the roots reggae legacy of Bob Marley. For many of them, he does not represent the end of roots and culture or the end of roots reggae, he is the second Bob Marley

Yellowman: Because I change the face of reggae music. You understand? That's why if you look at the album, the Columbia album [*King Yellowman*], you see a little paragraph, write up, say I was the man after Bob Marley, you understand?

Reggae pundits have bestowed the title "the next Bob Marley" on a series of promising Jamaican artists. Yellowman was not the first, nor the last to enjoy this, but he has taken it to heart in a way few others have. As far back as 1983 he understood that to follow in Marley's footsteps he needed to present his audience with a message. That message, however, would remain largely unshaped and undefined for at least another year. When a journalist asked him in that year if he felt "the responsibility now as a major artists," he responded

Yeah, I pick up this responsibility like y'know, now Bob [Marley] gone as what people say, so I just pick up this responsibility, to spread reggae all over the world, as far as I can spread it (Yellowman interviewed in Saunders 1983, 15)

The deejay expounds on his message further in the article

All I have to tell the youth is just have patience and wait until fe dem time come come, and if you have a talent yuh no fe sit 'pon it just go out there and use it (Ibid )

I asked him to expand on the connection between he and Marley

Yellowman If I wasn't doing the message my music wouldn't be so popular like Bob Marley In back of people mind Bob Marley is first and I am second But my division is different—reggae, dancehall We carry the message

Brent Hagerman What was the message?

Y Maybe not in early days, but now peace and love and unite together and stop tribal thing in Africa, no more way

Yellowman understands his role as an entertainer to be a carrier of this two-pronged interrelated message First, he is a reggae ambassador, like Marley, responsible for taking Jamaican culture around the globe Second, he espouses a message of universal peace, a sentiment he finds rooted in Rastafari and defines as freedom from racial and religious discrimination and freedom from gang warfare, including bi-partisan political violence (often referred to as civil war in his songs) There are other messages in his songs as well In later chapters I focus on the messages found in his slack material such as moral regulation, correct sexual morality and social and political critiques For now, however, I return to his life story at the time Yellowman was becoming the world's most famous reggae artist, and, indeed, the most famous Jamaican

## CHAPTER 8

### Yellowman Take Over

By 1981 Yellowman was among the island's top deejays. In August 1981 he won the Festival '81 Deejay Contest held at Ranny Williams Entertainment Centre on Hope Road in Kingston, beating out Welton Irie, Nicodemus, Johnny Ringo, and Toyman. In the process, Lesser has said that Yellowman's success had to do with timing; he was a remarkable deejay at a time when the art of the deejay was exploding.

When Winston Foster arrived on the scene, dancehall broke loose, and this albino deejay appeared out of nowhere and took Jamaica by storm. He succeeded because he represented everything dancehall culture stood for and also embodied every current musical trend. He was a deejay at the height of deejay dominance. He was both topical and slack. His irreverence thrilled a population who craved excitement. Yellowman was a deejay mischief-maker; he entertained people, outraged them, made them laugh. He became Jamaica's second reggae ambassador, after Bob Marley, and he was able to take dancehall to places reggae had never been before (Lesser 2008, 102).

No longer were deejays considered beneath singers, nor were they now simply live entertainers. The late seventies saw several deejays begin successful recording careers, which led to demand for similar product. Enter Yellowman. Within one year—by *Sunsplash* 1982—there would be no doubt who was top deejay. In the wake of that historical concert, Yellowman would be dubbed the king of dancehall by the Jamaican media. Leading up to this event, however, was a whirlwind year which began with a controversial single, and a true story, about police brutality.

## **Soldier Take Over (1981)**

Despite his success and fame as a live deejay, Yellowman knew that the soundsystem gigs could only carry him so far. They paid well but the top deejays on the island were the ones with records and international audiences like U Roy, Big Youth, Michigan and Smiley, Trinity, Lone Ranger, Clint Eastwood and General Saint. Up until this point the studio culture remained closed to Yellowman, outside of his limited work with Leon, who recorded “Even Tide Fire” and a song called “1980.” Now, as Aces ace in the hole, he was able to finally crack into the record industry. Jimmy Wynter had no interest in the recording business at the time however. Between Aces, the night club and an alleged ganja dealing business, he had other sources of money. Rarely did artists book studio time themselves and so it took another producer to usher Yellowman into the studio culture. With a producer named Tanka, Yellowman scored his first hit on the soundsystems with a song called “Soldier Take Over.”<sup>93</sup> The song was recorded back in his Maxfield neighbourhood at Jo Jo Hookim’s Channel One Studio. Home to Jamaica’s most in-demand rhythm section, Sly and Robbie, Channel One spent the late seventies building a respectable reputation as one of the island’s top studios, especially for dancehall. While Hookim had turned away Yellowman once he now allowed the celebrity dundus deejay studio time.

“Soldier Take Over’s” title comes from sixties rocksteady song “Soldiers Take Over” by The R10 Grandes. Reggae is a music that constantly reinvents itself by drawing on its past for present inspiration. Like most deejays and singers Yellowman’s thematic

---

<sup>93</sup> Released as single, also on *Crucial Reggae Driven By Sly & Robbie* (Island, 1982). It was later rerecorded for the film soundtrack *Club Paradise* in 1986.

palette would often be taken from previous artist's work, just as his rhythm tracks were always part of the vast storehouse of old and newly created riddims. The riddim for "Soldier Take Over," for instance, was called "Mad Mad." It was originally a Studio One riddim made famous by the Alton Ellis song of the same name and Michigan and Smiley used the riddim on their hit "Diseases." The riddim would give Yellowman one of his biggest hits in 1983 as "Zunguzung" but in the meantime "Soldier Take Over" was enough to help Yellowman further his campaign to dominate reggae. Whereas the Rio Grandes song was about soldiers controlling the ubiquitous rudies or gangsters, the subject of several rocksteady era songs, Yellowman's lyric was a broad-based attack on what he saw was a military state endangering innocent civilians. The song is based on an incident between Yellowman and the army, he was stopped during a curfew and made to walk on his knees.<sup>94</sup>

Yellowman One night I was coming from Sly Pen Road going to Eventide Home I was walking through a road named Ivory Road and I bumped into soldiers. They were like, "come here red bwoy you do the song named 'Radication'<sup>95</sup> and all them thing? You always deejay about soldier So we going make you march pon your knee." Him say, "you march from yaso pon your knee to deso." So they make me march pon my knee on the asphalt for maybe 'bout half hour to a hour. When I get up all my knee sore, the skin peeling off my knee. That's when I wrote that song, because I was jeering them in the song.

Brent Hagerman So you didn't talk back?

Y No, I couldn't talk back [they had guns] and we were at a place where nobody else could see. There was around six of them.

BH Did you start singing that song right after that?

---

<sup>94</sup> Wexler (2001) quotes Yellowman saying that he had a run in with soldiers in 1979 during a curfew and they made him walk on his knees. This may have occurred in 1980 or 1981—probably 1981 since that is when it was recorded. During outbreaks of political violence the authorities would instigate curfews on the citizenry to help curb violence.

<sup>95</sup> Yellowman was already deejaying a song called "Operation Radication" in the dance that was critical of the way the authorities dealt with gang violence.

Y Ya man

BH How long after that until you recorded it?

Y Like about four or five months after Because that was a hit music inna de dance when me deejay

In revenge Yellowman pokes fun at the military using toilet humour (“Some wear helmet / When they can’t find a toilet they doo doo in a it) and belittling the lack of agency soldiers have over their own lives (“Government boots are not your own”) But just as “Even Tide Fire” subtly mixed humour and social concern, “Soldier Take Over” is a bold statement on the island’s police state leading up to the 1980 election that made little or no distinction between “bad men” and ordinary Jamaicans caught in the crossfire

The soldier take over  
Take over the whole of Jamaica  
Them a mogel in the jeep and tanker

Me say look out, look out the soldier a come  
Them a look fe de badman whe de fire dem gun  
And if you no run dey goin’ shoot you to de ground  
—Yellowman, “Soldier Take Over”

The song is a concise political statement and shows Yellowman as a defiant citizen and musician determined to shame the soldiers that humiliated him but also willing to risk further suffering and even sanction in order to speak his mind. He takes them to task for racial slurs, misuse of authority, unprovoked violent behaviour and their lack of intelligence

Say on my way to Up Park Camp<sup>96</sup>  
Me bruk a jeep load it full a soldier man

---

<sup>96</sup> Up Park Camp is the army/police barracks

Dem say, “Come here bwoy, you favour gunman”  
You a idiot bwoy, me name a Yellowman  
He said, “Shut your mouth before you feel me Remington”  
Him kick away me foot and he box me inna me face  
He box me inna me face and him kick away me foot  
He said, “Red bwoy I don’t love how you look”<sup>97</sup>

Reggae has a proud history of critiquing hegemony but Yellowman’s song is particularly important here insofar as he has been criticized for being non-political and non-cultural <sup>98</sup> At a time when Yellowman was chatting almost pure slackness every night on Acesound, his second record, “Soldier Take Over,” was tame by comparison and, most importantly, was another example of social commentary His mix of slackness and social commentary would fuse more and more over his recorded career

### **Yellowman and the Media**

Public reaction to “Soldier Take Over” was positive, people were frustrated by the behaviour of soldiers and police and Yellowman’s song gave voice to this anger The song made Yellowman a hit island-wide “Everybody, especially the youth boy dem, like that music,” he says today The song was too political to play on the radio, but Yellowman says it was a hit in the dance But by hit, he does not mean the song was played by soundsystems, only that his performances of it were wildly popular—at that time soundsystems only spun records of singers, not deejays Deejaying was still considered a live entertainment form and the reason people went to the dance was to hear and see live deejays, not recorded versions of them As such, Yellowman’s songs got very little play on soundsystems other than his own performed versions

---

<sup>97</sup> “Bruk” is to meet up with

<sup>98</sup> See Section III Chapter 2 for further details

Beth Lesser People never played deejay records on soundsystems in the eighties They only played singers, deejays were live There might be a soul soundsystem that didn't have deejays and they maybe played them, because they mix it up The soul sounds a lot of times mix it up and play a little calypso, American soul, etc They might play a few deejay records But the real downtown soundsystems only played vocals (Lesser 2009)<sup>99</sup>

The fact that "Soldier Take Over" was censored from radio was nothing new Jamaica had strict guidelines on the types of songs that were deemed fit for airplay and Yellowman's material would notoriously fail the censorship guidelines again and again Yellowman considers any song of his that failed to get airplay a song that was banned, though in reality, very few deejays were getting airplay in those days "You still have a record jury where they play music and just throw it off the air if it don't sound properly or fit for airplay" Several of his songs were either refused airplay from radio stations or were removed from radio after complaints were made about their content His outright slack tunes never had a chance on the airwaves, but in Jamaica's political climate, any song that could be misconstrued as supporting one or the two political parties was also subject to censorship

The media in Jamaica had a love-hate relationship with Yellowman Radio programmers, outside of a few reggae fans like Barry G, routinely refused to play his material, or removed it from airplay after complaints Yellowman feels that as soon as one of his records arrived at a radio station it was thrown in the trash before anyone even listened to it

7

---

<sup>99</sup> By vocals she means singers Simeon Stewart has told me that soundsystems would often play deejay records early in the night, before the deejays arrived

Beth Lesser They would play for a while and then people started calling up and saying, “you’re criticizing Chiney men” or something And then they would ban them Or sometimes some deejays would be able to slip them in, maybe Barry G, because he played a little bit more roots things But a lot of people just heard them from foreign countries I remember specifically Mr Chin being banned because of the Chinese references, and some of his other stuff He had a bunch—they just banned anything (Lesser 2009)

There was very little reggae on the radio at that time When asked in 1984 why Jamaican radio does not play reggae Yellowman responded “I don’t know They just try to fight reggae, you know The only person to play reggae is Barry G” (Yellowman quoted in Singer 1984, 7)

In conjunction with his ongoing feud with Jamaican radio Yellowman was often demonized in the island’s newspapers, either in editorials or in letters to the editor But this was by no means universal—as the island’s leading reggae artist he also enjoyed favourable press at the same time

Beth Lesser On the one hand there would be articles that say, “Superstar Yellowman appearing at Sunsplash” and on the next page it would be like “Yellowman and his slackness, they’re bringing down the nation and leading the youth astray,” that kind of thing It was a real love/hate relationship they had with Yellowman They just didn’t know what to do with him On the one hand he’s great, he’s bringing tourists, he’s making reggae international, is he the new Bob Marley? On the other hand, all this gun stuff, all this slackness, this is ruining the image of Jamaica (Lesser 2009)

An article from *The Gleaner* in the fall of 1984 carefully weights Yellowman’s appeal and controversy

Yellowman is not only a DJ, he is an entertainer and pound for pound for pound will go down as one of the finest, if not the finest this country has produced He is able to rap on current affairs Poke fun at his colour and former social background and when demanded to by the crowd can be very obscene, much to their

enjoyment Yellow Man is almost always asked to do his dirty act by a crowd that have come to expect this of him. A great majority of us may well turn up our noses at this but one thing is sure, we cannot detract from the fact that this Jamaican is very talented, smart, as he can read his audience like a good politician and finally is the hottest reggae property we have right now (McGowan 1984)

### **Culture and Slack on the Soundsystems**

Each deejay that was steady on a sound would work with that sound every night they had a show. For a busy sound like Aces, that meant Yellow worked six out of seven nights a week, Josey Wales remembers “Only Tuesday our day off. Soundsystem play from Monday to Monday. Rest on Tuesday, record and recuperate.” If a sound did not have a show during the week, though, many deejays took the opportunity to go hear their peers at rival sounds. The relationships between artists like Charlie Chaplin, Josey Wales, Brigadier Jerry and Yellowman was fraternal and besides helping to promote their own career, these visits allowed the deejays to have fun sparring with each other and pick up new lyrics.

But there were rules, particularly around slackness. With Yellowman at its helm, you could expect an Aces dance to have a lot of slackness. Later, when Junjo had his Volcano sound, the same was true. But there were a few sounds that were known as strict cultural sounds and frowned on slack lyrics. Two of these, Stereograph or Stur-Gav and Jah Love, were Rasta-run sounds. When Yellowman came to guest with them, he would be told by either U-Roy at Stur-Gav or Briggie at Jah Love to “keep it clean.”

Josey Wales I could show you tapes from 25-27 years ago where he comes to Junjo’s sound, Volcano, and we worked the mic together. And could play you tapes when he come to Stereograph in Spanish Town in 1983 and he tone it down ‘Cause there’s a respect for U-Roy and a certain type of crowd. ‘Cause Stur-Gav

was playing for a mostly Rastafarian crowd 'cause we were changing the thing to a strictly culture. Most people could not get away with what he run away with—both culture and slack (Wales 2009)

### **Feeding in the Dancehall: A Live Session**

Taping of live dancehall sessions was common in the late seventies and early eighties and was encouraged by sound men because it freely advertised their sound throughout the island and abroad. The tapes circulated freely among fans and were heard on buses and taxis, often the very day after the live session. Live session tapes helped to spread the hype about an artist and allowed a greater demographic to hear their songs. And for artists like Brigadier Jerry, live tapes meant that he could garner the reputation of being one of the most popular deejays on the island without ever stepping into a studio to record a track. In fact, Lesser surmises that one reason for the increase in live session tapes in the early eighties was due to the demand for Brigadier material, since none was available on record (Lesser 2008, 147). The motivation behind the tapes was never profit, no one sold them, and collecting them became a major pastime for fans (Ibid.)

Ever since the Tastees competition in 1979 Yellowman had been travelling the island with sounds like Black Scorpio, Gemini and Virgo. His fame was being broadcast island-wide by live session tapes that eager fans would record at each dancehall session. These tapes would then make their way around the island and be played loudly from buses and taxis—important mediums for the spread of dancehall culture and its proliferation into the mainstream public sphere. Zimma, Sagittarius's bassist during the 2008 tour, remembers hearing these tapes in high school. His family was Christian, however, and frowned on dancehall. His parents and grandparents discouraged him from

listening to it, saying dancehall, even roots reggae like Bob Marley, was evil

Zimma But they can't shelter from what is played on the bus [when] you use to go to school That is where we would get all this stuff The driver would just put in a tape of last night's show at the dancehall and everybody would be quite That half hour to 45 min ride to school, that's where a church boy would get his dancehall experience, education

Brent Hagerman What was your first impression of Yellowman?

Z I thought, "whoa" he just said that thing? I said to the next child next to me— did you hear that? He said the "P" word, 'cause of course you can't even say I think that's what popularized the arena of the dancehall in Jamaica Because you could play whatever you couldn't play on radio There was no censorship, just raw culture You want the real thing, go to the dancehall (Zimma 2008)<sup>100</sup>

But it was not only Jamaicans that heard about Yellowman Soundsystem tapes were transnational products, moving to England, Canada and the U S long before Myspace, Youtube, Facebook and Twitter Fans of dancehall got to hear Yellowman, and hear plenty about him, but unless you lived in Jamaica you had no opportunity to see him perform and before he released many studio albums, live session tapes were the main way fans could listen to him

On February 10, 1982 Lloyd Campbell and Jimmy Wynter recorded a live Aces dance and later released it as *Yellowman & Fathead Feeding in the Dancehall, Live at Aces* The album marked the first time an artist had their own live dancehall LP While the majority of the record is Yellowman, or the albino deejay in combination with Fathead, Aces singer Jah Rubel contributes two tracks and Little Harry one

*Live at Aces* is a vastly different album than Yellowman's studio records of the time Because this was a recording of a live soundsystem the backing tracks were pre-

---

<sup>100</sup> The "P" word here refers to either "punanny," "pussy" or "pum pum "

recorded instrumental versions or dubs. And unlike on his studio material of the era, Yellowman does not hold back his slackness, instead he is raw, rude and fully irreverent. He boasts about his sexual desirability and special sexual abilities, describing sexual exploits and counting the number of girlfriends he has. His sexual appetite is so large, he tells us, that he is not picky about who he sleeps with, at one point telling the female subject of the song "Under You," "I woulda sex off your mother and your sister too, true." Sex is also used to get easy laughs from the crowd and he uses slackness to combat prejudice and racism directed at his albinism. Whether it is saying that his "yellow body" is a desirable commodity that women seek ("Watch how me sexy / You want me yellow body / Run come get it" off "She Boom) or using his uniquely coloured sexual organs as part of the joke ("Look under me and tell me what you see / It's one pair a balls on me yellow body" off "Under Me"), Yellowman has attempted to nullify the Jamaican cultural associations of freakishness and dundus.

For a comparison of Yellowman's slackness on record and his slackness live in the dancehall the song "Funky Reggae Party" is instructive. Listed on the album as "Mighty Diamonds Selection" (because of the riddim used by the song), a much cleaner studio version of the song also appears on 1982's *One Yellowman*. Here are the lyrics to the live version.

Watch the one inna de shorts  
Watch how the girl a wind up her ass  
I don't know if she wear one panty or drawers

Watch the one inna de pants  
Dat deh one she come from Portland  
Dat deh one me knows a Indian  
Dat deh one must love Yellowman  
When me done deejay she going give me romance

Watch the one inna de frock  
 Dat deh girl rush me cock  
 Watch the one inna de white  
 Dat deh one is a damn sodomite  
 I hear say she can't boil a pot a rice  
 Every day she get up it a fuss and fight  
 The girl a use the acid and knife

Watch the girl inna de red  
 She feel up me two seed like four leg  
 Watch the girl inna de red  
 Eh, pon the bed and open your leg  
 Eh, pon the bed and open your leg  
 I tell you likkle girl I going push in me leg

—Yellowman, “Funky Reggae Party,” *Live at Aces*

In the studio most, if not all, of the sexual references are removed. In fact the entire focus of the song is altered. In the live version the song is meant to name different girls present at the dance who either want to be with Yellowman or have already been with him and blatantly turns each woman into a sexual object that leering male eyes consume. Alternatively, the studio version is about the dancehall space. A chorus is added that says “This are de funky reggae party dedicated to people over 40” and Yellowman establishes himself as the responsible host trying to improve the dance experience for his patrons.

Come off of de road mek the dance overload  
 Come off of de street mek the dance well sweet  
 Your boss deejay at the mic emcee  
 You don't know that me name is Mr Sexy  
 —Yellowman, “Funky Reggae Party”

He does indulge in self-referential boasting, as in “Watch the one inna de pants / Lord she love Yellowman” but unlike the live version, the element of slackness is not present.

Even the title of the song is a cultural reference it is a nod to the Bob Marley/Lee Perry collaboration “Punky Reggae Party,” a song about punk and reggae genres sharing space in British clubs

That the live version is slacker by far is telling the dancehall audience wanted and received Yellowman’s rarest material But records went beyond the dancehall not only to Jamaican media but abroad to fans in the US , UK , Canada and Europe Yellowman tailored his material carefully for each audience and still does this today Because of this Yellowman is a different artist to different groups Locally, and globally there are two separate Yellowmans The two audiences are familiar with different songs, partly due to the network of record companies and how singles and albums were released in each country For instance, foreign artists often don’t know songs like “Fools go to Church” because it was never released as a single and can only be found on an LP that was released by a Jamaican label, Hit Bound The song “Nobody Move,” however, was not popular in Jamaica but is one of the mainstays of his international set

This is not to say Yellowman’s records were not very slack—increasingly he released ruder material during the early eighties But even today, there is a difference between what Yellowman does in the dancehall and on record, and this is indicative of the difference in the Jamaican and global audience

I heard Yellowman chat at a sound in Kingston’s Concrete Jungle alongside Squidly to a small local audience in winter 2008 Here he did the song “Dry Head Adassa,” a slack song about a girl who shaves her pubic hairs When I asked him about it later he told me that he does not sing that while on tour outside Jamaica because it is the kind of song Jamaicans alone appreciate Concert tapes of Yellowman shows abroad in

the eighties document an artist at the height of his popularity revolving between crude slackness and cultural material. Today his international shows include slackness but it is toned down. His local shows, however, still give the audience a shot of the raw king of slack. They also seem less affected by Yellowman's pairing sexuality with culture. "To them it was entertainment, they understand. They know that is my style, I can switch from one to the other."

### **Fools Go to Church on Sunday**

"Fools go to Church on Sunday" is another track off *Live at Aces* that is instructive here. Written at a time when Christians were heavily criticizing Yellowman and dancehall in general, "Fools go to Church" is a humorous piece of vitriol aimed at getting revenge on Yellowman's most vocal critics. Today he wishes he did not use the word "fools" because he believes that most people who attend church are not fools. Still, it fits his sentiment at the time. The main joke in the song is that the preacher keeps the money from the collection plate, but there are hints of Yellowman's own religious beliefs here that come to fruition in later songs. He criticizes the church for deception and theft of the money in the collection plate and presents the listener with an alternative. While he does not name this as Rastafari, it is clear through his use of the term "Jah" for God. "You just pon your knee / praise Jah Almighty"

While the religious ideas in this song are pretty vague, Yellowman would develop them over the next year and release the track on the album *One Yellowman*. There the Rasta sentiment would be fleshed out and more nuance added to the critique of the

Christian church Here, from that version, is a sampling of the lyrics

The apostle pon the pulpit a tell pure lie  
He dress up in a jacket he dress up in a tie  
A tell you say great God is coming from the sky  
I tell you Yellowman say me know that a lie  
Me tell you the truth I tell you no lie  
—Yellowman, “Fools go to Church”

Yellowman questions Christianity’s view that heaven is above the earth and charges the church with telling lies Peter Tosh and Bob Marley use this same argument in their song “Get Up Stand Up” and go further by presenting the Rastafarian view that God is a living man This stanza also shows us Yellowman’s understanding of himself as a proclaimer of the truth This idea functions in many of his songs and as I will show later, first draws on the reggae tradition of artist as preacher or teacher, and second is used by Yellowman and others to present his idea of morality, religion and right behaviour

Also in this song, we start to see the groundwork laid for a lyrical theme present in several later songs which I examine in the final chapter of this dissertation Yellowman has said that the second Rastafarian song he wrote was “Natty Sat upon a Rock” in 1982 “Fools go to Church” is one of several other Yellowman songs that borrow lyrically and thematically from “Natty Sat upon a Rock ”

You can’t go to Zion with your ammunition  
You coulda never hide from Jah  
You coulda never hide from Jah  
You get away from man but you no get away from Jah  
You get away from man but you no get away from Jah  
You walking through the jungles of Africa  
You open the Bible and read up a chapter  
Started to chant up the roots and culture

Tell it to the brothers and me tell it to the sisters  
—Yellowman, “Fools Go to Church”

Here Yellowman is offering a counter reality to the church’s reality, which he understands as deceptive. Drawing on Afrocentric imagery and Rastafarian ideology, Yellowman tells us he believes in a higher authority called Jah, insinuates that Africa is a hallowed land, and then presents us with the image of reading the Bible in Africa and preaching roots and culture to the community.

With *Live at Aces*, slackness had progressed from the live arena of dancehall and entered the sphere of the recording industry, where it thrived. Yellowman’s slackness would proliferate in the studio over the next few years, as would his ability to include culture on his records. Yellowman’s popularity at this point meant that producers were scrambling to get him into the studio so much so that his recorded output over the next few years would eclipse almost any other artist globally.

### **Channel One Era**

Before 1981 was finished Yellowman was well on his way to a lucrative recording career. Unlike the music industry in America and England, reggae artists rarely signed a traditional record deal in Jamaica. Instead, they would work with a single producer or studio for a period of time, often until they could get a better deal elsewhere, and then move on. Some would record for several producers simultaneously. By 1982 Yellowman started a four year relationship with Henry Junjo Lawes but not all of his recorded output

from this era was recorded by Lawes. Several freelance producers, looking for a hit with the deejay of the moment, called upon Yellowman to voice lyrics over riddims they either built (meaning they paid a studio band to record) or bought from other studios and producers. As such, Yellowman's output in Jamaica was massive for the first few years of the eighties. There were hundreds of singles issued, many of which never made it to a full length album and were never released outside of the island.

Yellowman's first full length album came in 1981 and was recorded for Jo Jo Hookim at Channel One. Time and again Yellowman would run into producers who had turned him away a few years earlier only to welcome him into their studio once they realized he was a financially viable investment. Of these producers, Joe Gibbs and Coxson Dodd were the only ones against whom Yellowman harboured an ongoing grudge.

Channel One's Jo Jo Hookim was present when Yellowman recorded "Soldier Take Over" for Tanka. Jo Jo was impressed and asked him to come back and record an album at the studio with him as producer. In classic Yellowman style—that is to say prolific—the deejay ended up voicing enough material for two full length albums during the sessions at Channel One. *Them Mad Over Me* was released first and *One Yellowman* later. *Them Mad Over Me* featured several hits and songs that still show up in Yellowman concerts today, among them "I'm Getting Married," the same song that caused boos at Spanish Jar just a few years before, "Mad Over Me" and "Gunman." It also had his Tastee song, "Me Kill Barnie." The slackness is apparent on the album, but nothing compared to what Yellowman was chatting on the mic live in those days. Yet the cover art is a drawing of the deejay as superstar chatting on the mic to a crowd of ecstatic women.

It blatantly depicted the image Yellowman was crafting about himself, that of irresistible ladies' man and sex machine

As with every Yellowman full length album, there is both slackness and social commentary, both slackness and culture. The title track is Yellowman's modus operandi most simply put—all the girls want him. His humour on the track is apparent from the beginning when, in a spoken intro indicative of much of his early material, he announces "Hi, my name is Mr Yellowman, and down in Jamaica they call me Mr Sexy. And you see, I come to make you feel happy." The intro is obviously voiced with an international audience in mind and, in 1981, it is reasonable to assume that Yellowman was working hard to break into the U.K. and U.S. markets. He positions himself as "Mr Sexy," as if there is no dispute about it in his home country, and ensures that his audience knows what to expect up front: he is here to entertain. But other than announcing again and again how much of a sex symbol he is, this song is tame in comparison to his later material.

The following year, 1982 would prove to be Yellowman's most prolific year. He released approximately ten solo studio albums<sup>101</sup> in that year alone, leading some critics to claim that he flooded the market with too much material, some of it substandard, and that this hurt his popularity. It did not appear to make a dent in his appeal, either at home or abroad, as Yellowman continued to reign as dancehall's leading deejay.

---

<sup>101</sup> One reason it is difficult to determine Yellowman's exact discography is that albums were often released by more than one company using different names. Producers licensed records to companies in several markets, so an album like *Mister Yellowman* in Jamaica and the U.K., would come to be released with the title *Duppy* or *Gunman* in the U.S. By my estimation Yellowman released 10 studio albums in 1982, each with separate material.

## CHAPTER 9

### International Yellowman

#### Toronto 1982

April 1982 marked Yellowman's first journey outside of Jamaica and it was a small scale North American tour. One of the cities he stopped in was Toronto. With its large Jamaican immigrant population, Yellowman found crowds of fans waiting for him, many of whom had heard him via the live dance cassettes or singles coming out of Jamaica. The live cassettes would be brought or mailed overseas by friends and relatives, long before email and websites, and Yellowman's records were sold in several Caribbean record stores in Toronto. A promoter named "Rapper" (Larry Woodcock) booked him to play at the St. Lawrence Market. David Kingston had a radio show called *Reggae Showcase* on CKLN throughout the eighties and Toronto reggae promoters would routinely encourage their artists to go on the show on Friday afternoons to promote their gigs. Kingston's wife, Beth Lesser, was a photographer and journalist and together the two published a magazine called *Reggae Quarterly*. The couple first met Yellowman when he arrived at the station to promote the St. Lawrence Market show.

Beth Lesser: My husband had a radio show at the time, [Yellowman] would come down to the radio show. Because there were so many rumours of shows that if the artists didn't actually show up on the radio station people didn't think they were really in town, so promoters would make sure their artists were down there every Friday night. (Lesser 2009)

David Kingston remembers that the first Toronto show was oversold and this caused

“pure pandemonium ” There were about 1,000 people outside without tickets and only two policeman on horses trying to control the crowd (Kingston 2009) Yellowman was a star in Jamaica already and his first foray to Canada suggested the same Lesser was taken aback by the response

Beth Lesser Oh my God, it was just masses of people It was like the Beatles again or something There were people screaming for Yellowman (Lesser 2009)

On this first tour Yellowman performed the same way he would have at a Jamaican soundsystem show Instead of being backed by a band, Sunshine Sound, a local soundsystem owned by Jamaican musician Leroy Sibbles, spun riddims while Yellowman deejayed to the excited crowd Fans used to dancehall culture saw no problem with this but others, drawn by hype that suggested Yellowman was the next Bob Marley, expected a stage show with a live band

David Kingston It caused great consternation to many people, as he was being billed as “the biggest thing since Bob Marley,” so naturally a lot of mainstream fans later said that [they] felt ripped off because he was “backed by records ” The soundsystem thing hadn’t really become understood at that point (Kingston 2009)

This confusion had to do somewhat with how reggae is understood in North America, outside Caribbean circles Marley’s crossover appeal meant that white rock fans were drawn into roots reggae via Marley’s rock-inspired Wailers band and the successful marketing campaign Island Records’ Chris Blackwell concocted to brand Marley as a Rasta rebel using marketing tools foreign to the reggae industry at the time<sup>102</sup> Other roots artists in the seventies followed the Blackwell/Marley mold and so the face of reggae in

---

<sup>102</sup> Such as a focus on albums instead of singles, a band identity instead of an artist and backing band, and a publicity campaign that sought to shape Marley’s identity and help him cross over to a rock demographic

North America was band-oriented stage shows put on by acts like Burning Spear, Peter Tosh, Israel Vibration and Culture. Unlike dancehall fans, who understood the culture of soundsystems, deejays and riddims, these Blackwell/Marley-bred reggae fans wanted deejay culture packaged the same way. Yellowman began to understand this and for future tours he would enlist the services of Jamaica's Sagittarius Band and adopt many of the performance techniques of stadium rock acts.

### **Sunsplash 1982**

He went on stage Mister Yellowman and he came off King Yellowman. That is how Reggae Sunsplash 1982 is remembered in dancehall memory. The Sunsplash festival, held annually in Montego Bay, was at that time reggae's hottest ticket. *The Gleaner's* headline read the next day "Biggest-ever Crowd Jams Sunsplash Yellow Man Steals the Show," and called him "the Prince of Deejays" (*The Gleaner* August 3, 1982). Yellowman's marathon set that early August 5 morning at Jarrett Park, Montego Bay, was literally the crowning moment in his career. He hit the stage around 6:30am, just as the sun rose—Jamaican concerts typically start in the late evening and do not finish until sunrise—and chatted his way into the history books. His one hour set was welcomed by a record breaking 40,000 in attendance, the largest Sunsplash audience up until that point. Yellowman kicked off his set with the instantly popular "Jah Made Us Fe a Purpose," a song about albinos. He was backed by a band he had only performed with a few times before. Sagittarius was started by Simeon Stewart (keyboards), Derrick Barnett (bass) and Desmond Gaynor (drums) in the late seventies. Impressed with the band's ability to

follow him and keen on developing his international appeal, he asked Sagittarius to be his steady backing band after the show. With few exceptions, Sagittarius has been Yellowman's backing band up until today.

### **Panic on the Streets of London**

If Sunsplash was Yellowman's crowning moment, what happened next was proof of his dominion. Now teamed with a live backing band, Yellowman could present an entirely new face of dancehall to the international community that had grown up listening to the Wailers, Burning Spear, ASWAD and Steal Pulse. A week after Sunsplash, Yellowman and Sagittarius landed at Heathrow Airport in London for a one-off show at Edmonton Pickett's Lock. Brought to the city by David Rodigan, a deejay at independent station Capital Radio, the band was alarmed to find what they thought was a riot in the streets outside their hotel and wrongly assumed that political unrest must be the cause. Instead, the road block and Scotland Yard were for Yellowman. Crowds of people blocked the road between the hotel and the venue just to get a glimpse of the albino deejay, the police had to be called.

Yellowman: They just bring me to do one show but because of the massive crowd I have to end up and do four shows at the Pickett's Lock, a big arena. From hotel Scotland Yard escorted me like a prisoner to and from the show for four nights. I did think it was a riot. I was saying to Rodigan, 'what's going on?' And Rodigan said 'no, it's for you they're securing.' I said maybe I am Margaret Thatcher.

This was the first time Yellowman truly felt like a superstar. The road block Yellowman caused would become notorious in dancehall history, and Rodigan hurriedly secured the

sports complex for three more nights. Yellow was getting used to being mobbed by fans back home but did not expect the same treatment across the ocean. He later told a journalist, “I didn’t know so much people know of me until I reach these foreign country, I know that a lot of people love me and I love that and I appreciate” (Saunders 1983, 15)

Jamaican music had a niche market in England, created by record companies in the sixties like Island, Trojan, and Doctor Bird. England was a main destination of the English Caribbean diaspora—people looking for work who emigrated to the colonial power in search of opportunities that were not available in places like Barbados, Jamaica, Trinidad, Guyana and Antigua. Both people of Caribbean and British descent consumed reggae. By the time Yellowman landed on their soil, he was already a superstar and did not even know it. England had come over his spell, and later North America would too. Several fan websites list the following quote, attributed to an anonymous reviewer, that gives a sense of how he was received: “Listening to Yellowman sing is like watching Michael Jordan play basketball. He knows he’s got it, you know he’s got it, and it’s a trip just experiencing him perform.”

British roots reggae sensation ASWAD opened the shows for Yellowman, demonstrating further that culture and slackness were not necessarily dichotomous elements in reggae concerts at the time. Here was one of England’s premiere roots bands (alongside Steel Pulse) opening up for Jamaica’s slackest deejay. The show was a must-see for any reggae fan in London and many of the who’s who of the scene showed up to check Yellowman out. Steel Pulse, UB40, Tapper Zukie, and Errol Dunkley included.

It was before the second night that Yellowman “composed” what he considers to

be his first Rastafarian song<sup>103</sup>

Yellowman I remember I make up a song before the second show and I do it on the second show “Jah Jah a we guiding star”

Brent Hagerman So you wrote that after the first London show?

Y Not wrote, I just had it in me head, you know?

BH And what did you tell the band?

Y I just tell them to play a riddim Me just say play something

BH But that’s going to determine how you perform, right?

Y Ya, that going determine the key and the melody

He now says that the Rasta lyrics got a positive reception from the audience but surmises that since this was his first time in London and he was so popular that “everything I say was ‘yaaahhh’”<sup>104</sup>

A review of the show says that Yellowman was one of the only reggae artists that could sell out “the sprawling white elephant of a sports complex at Pickett’s Lock” and declares that he announced to the audience “Me the first blood claat white man to chat reggae music” (Reel 1982)

In the wake of Sunsplash and the first tour to England Yellowman was on top of the reggae world The press was scrambling to interview him, but was actually having trouble, as Yellowman had no publicist In 1983 *Black Echoes*, dubbed “Britain’s only soul, funk ‘n’ reggae newspaper” put Yellowman, 24 years old at the time, on the cover of

<sup>103</sup> By my estimation he was already singing some Rasta lyrics by this time Of the 10 studio albums he recorded in 1982, many contain Rastafarian references I have been unable to find accurate records of the studio sessions but assume that some of these at least were recorded before this September 1982 concert

<sup>104</sup> As has been shown, Yellowman was singing Rastafarian-themed songs before this, but he pin-points this as his first musical expression of his Rastafarian faith

their July 16 issue The article portrays Yellowman as camera shy, diplomatic, congenial and bit uneasy when it comes to answering questions about slackness

Question I understand you're something of a sex symbol

Yellowman No, no (After much persuasion, he explained) Oh Yes, I talk about ladies' clit, right? Ah, just love lyrics (Yellowman, interviewed by Saunders 1983, 15)

By portraying vulgar slackness as "love lyrics" Yellowman was downplaying the controversy slackness was garnering at home However, he was also insisting that slackness was innocuous in his understanding, nothing to get upset about Certainly this quote demonstrates Yellowman's early acumen when talking to the press—the ability to diffuse a potentially embarrassing question—but as I will show in Section III, slackness as a medium for a discourse on relationships is not that far off the mark for how slackness is understood by dancehall audiences in Jamaica

## CHAPTER 10

### Message to the World

#### A Brush with Death

Tings me used to do me naw go dweet no more  
Caw the year it change to '84  
—Yellowman, “Nobody Move”

Yellowman’s success in Britain was unprecedented for a dancehall artist. It enabled him to get a major label contract in the U S—the first for a reggae deejay—and he hoped to emulate his Jamaican and British success there. Signing to Columbia, who already had a moderately successful reggae act on their roster with Third World, was a step in that direction. Columbia teamed Yellowman up with Run DMC for a track called “Roots, Rap, Reggae” on their album *King of Rock* and also enlisted producer Bill Laswell to help out with Yellowman’s new album. Both of these moves assisted in building Yellowman’s profile in the States.

The resulting *King Yellowman* was not a runaway success by any means but it did get the word out about Yellowman. But just as Yellowman was starting to get major exposure in the United States he suffered a severe setback. Hardship and suffering were no strangers to Yellowman but the anodynes of fame and fortune were short lived. Yellowman’s life was again touched by misery in 1984 when it was discovered that he had cancer. He was scheduled to tour in the United States to support the new *King Yellowman* album. This would be his coming out party to mainstream America. Not only had he landed the first major label American record deal of any reggae artist, he also had been the first dancehall deejay to record on a rap track. 1984 was shaping up to be the

International Year of Yellowman But shortly before he left Jamaica with Sagittarius to begin the tour he felt a pain in his jaw He assumed it was a tooth ache and kept the matter silent Band members and his manager at the time, Jimmy Wynter, remained in the dark Yellowman completed the tour but suffered increasing pain It was not until after the shows finished that he told the band he was in chronic pain He was still in New York at the time so visited a doctor there who discovered a tumor in his cheek The tumor proved to be cancerous and the doctors gave him two years to live<sup>105</sup> Rather than return to Jamaica he remained in New York to have an operation to remove the tumor and recuperate

The surgery had removed part of his jawbone on the left side of his face causing a severe deformity Reconstructive surgery was available to him but he opted not to undergo another surgical procedure at the time This was due to the high costs involved but also because the processes of surgery and recovery are extremely draining and painful and he simply does not want to undergo another one unless it is life threatening It is possible as well, given that he has sung songs criticizing cosmetic surgery, that he felt plastic surgery of any sort is unnatural and therefore not ita<sup>106</sup>

The cancer, for the time being, was kept to Yellowman's inner circle and not made public knowledge Relatively very few people in the U S knew who Yellowman was at this point outside of some who had vacationed in Jamaica or were part of certain demographics, such as reggae fans in Brooklyn and California, where his music was popular It was safe, then, for Yellowman to recuperate in the States—fans back home

---

<sup>105</sup> Elsewhere Yellowman has said the doctors gave him three years Some sources quote six months (Tamburrino 2010)

<sup>106</sup> For more on this see Section III Chapter 3

would simply assume he was living the dancehall lifestyle “over broad”

The reggae world eventually found out about the cancer but at times Yellowman even denied or hid the fact that he was sick. The boasting and signifying that deejays regularly practiced in the dancehall was designed to instill a sense of their invincibility among fans and rivals, to admit to sickness could be misconstrued as weakness. Under the rubric of rural Jamaican ideologies of the body, disease was the result of social or moral transgressions (Sobo 1995), Yellowman had worked hard to overcome the stigma of albinism which in itself represented a transgression of normative beliefs regarding race and phenotype<sup>107</sup>. As such, it is not hard to see why he initially denied reports that he had cancer. When Shanachie’s press release for “Going to the Chapel” announced that Yellowman had a cancerous tumor removed from his jaw, Yellowman told one interviewer, “I didn’t have any cancer, but I did have an abscess in my jaw” (Snowden 1986).

If Yellowman’s career had ended in 1984 he would have accomplished more than any deejay previous and he would no doubt still enjoy a legion of dedicated music fans today. Because of his brush with mortality, however, his celebrity took on an entirely new dimension. Instead of seeing his cancer as a weakness, fans overwhelmingly began to see in his ability to overcome extreme hardship a model of inspiration. Yellowman’s rags to riches life story—from a trash can in the ghetto to superstar deejay—was admirable to be sure, but now having defeated cancer and bearing the physical scars to prove it, galvanized his ability to connect with fans on a very personal level and increased their adoration and respect for him. Where he was previously respected for being a resilient

---

<sup>107</sup> I examine Jamaican ideologies of the body in Section III Chapters 1 and 4

ghetto success, overcoming extreme prejudice and being a wildly creative deejay, he now garnered recognition and honour for his stubborn perseverance against a universal killer. As I mentioned at the beginning of this section, this sentiment was demonstrated with the release of “Blueberry Hill,” Yellowman’s come-back song after his second bout with cancer.

Despite beating cancer in 1984, it returned. In fact, Yellowman has faced cancer and survived five times. His first tumor was removed from his jaw in 1984. By 1985 another had returned, this time in his neck. He remained cancer free for nearly a decade but in 1997 went to Miami to have another operation to remove a tumor from his chest. In 1999 Yellowman would suffer a double blow, the cancer had returned but this time in the form of a tumor on his vocal chords. The surgery to remove it scratched his vocal chords and his doctor said his voice would be normal in a few months. However, the man with the golden voice would be permanently affected. His voice has become scratchier and harsher in the years since the surgery and he has to be careful of not overusing his voice, or it gets worse. Yellowman had to take a few days off of our interview sessions in 2009 for fear of losing his voice. He delayed studio work as well, in order to keep his voice in good shape for a concert. These four operations are known to his fans, but a fifth operation took place in 2002 in Jamaica, this time to cut out a tumor that had developed in his head.<sup>108</sup> His body is now riddled with surgical scars—he pointed them out to me one day—but that does not deter him from wearing basketball shirts and shorts on stage. He is as proud of his body today as he was before the scars, a testament to his confidence, self-esteem and dignity.

---

<sup>108</sup> Yellowman has also said that he had an additional skin cancer in 1982.

## Life Change

Yellowman says that the cancer scare—being faced with his own mortality—caused a shift in how he lived and what he sang about. For him, this was an intense period of spiritual soul searching. He considers this a life change and it is borne out in his material in the albums he has released since. They are more conspicuously concerned with ultimate reality. Journalists have understood this as a softening of Yellowman's slackness in his post-cancer material, culminating in his work in the nineties on albums such as *Prayer* and *Message to the World*. "In recent years, Yellowman's bouts with throat cancer and skin cancer have resulted in a mellower, more serious approach to his music" (<http://humcity.com/humr/?p=1756>). Huey has said that Yellowman's material on 1987's *Don't Burn It Down*—after his second cancer scare, found him "delving more into social consciousness, the title cut was a pro-marijuana protest, while 'Stop Beat Woman' condemned domestic violence, and 'Free Africa' criticized apartheid" (Huey n.d.).

As I will point out in later chapters, Yellowman's slack material, both pre and post cancer, was not oppositional to social and political critique. These journalistic interpretations are oversimplifications because Yellowman wrote socially aware music as far back as "Even Tide Fire" in 1980, and started dealing with spiritual matters as early as 1982 when he penned "Jah are we Guiding Star." In addition, Yellowman not only released his slackest material after this point (particularly *The Negril Chill Challenge* in 1987), he continued his tradition of releasing both slackness and culture throughout his career, usually on the same album. For instance on *Prayer*, Yellowman revolves between the spiritual and the carnal—"Girlfriend" is a typical "girls dem" song that brags about his plethora of female companions and "Romance" has Yellowman singing about his

penis while a female backing singer moans as if in the throes of sex *Message to the World*, often cited as Yellowman's most cultural release, includes an extremely slack track called "Maximum," a referent to the kind of intercourse his girlfriends must "take" from him And *Yellowman's Good Sex Guide* (1995) was released in between *Prayer* and *Message to the World*

Histories and journalists that portray Yellowman as mellower and less slack during his later career have not engaged with his material adequately Yellowman has never ceased releasing slackness, though he has increased his output of unabashed spiritual material Examples include "One God," "Deliver Us," "Prayer," and "God Alone" Even though he describes a life change, he also insists that there is an essential Yellowman that never changes and this includes the aspect of slackness On "One Man" he sings "I cannot change, this is the way the Father made me," later chatting that while many deejays opt to "turn Rastaman" because it is economically viable, "Me naw change me image to please anyone"

The metaphor of bowing is used in dancehall to represent submission It often is associated with oral sex (which requires lowering the head) and therefore, under Jamaican sexual ethics, moral deviance To bow can also imply giving in or acquiescing When Buju Banton refused to apologize for his anti-gay song "Boom Bye Bye" Saunders considered his "refusal to bow" an act of defiance against what he perceived as immoral western values (Saunders 2003, 96) Similarly Yellowman does not want to be seen as bowing or submitting to any agenda other than his own, or a normative homegrown moral agenda He can include more spiritual material in his music, but does so on his own terms, this means not omitting songs about sex In the final chapter of this dissertation I

look at several instances where Yellowman tells his audience he is perfectly content putting together slackness and culture, and I examine his ability to do just that. His life change then, needs to be read in this context—it was not, as many have assumed—a move away from singing slackness.

That being said, Yellowman's religious engagement does indeed change focus at this point. His songs show that before 1984 Rastafarian symbols functioned to add local colour to his lyrics on one end of the spectrum but on the other end were used as important signifiers to work out issues of race and identity and to give voice to his burgeoning new faith. Cultural songs at that time were also meant to try and confront critics who oversimplified his repertoire and only saw him as a slackness deejay, by singing Rasta songs and Afrocentric songs, Yellowman was able to show the breadth of his material. There is as much a sense of using this material to prove something in those early days, as it was to voice a still fledging spiritual mindset. A few heartfelt religious songs come from this period, notably "Jah are we Guiding Star," but he begins to focus more on defining his religious worldview after his cancer scare.

Post 1984, Rastafari is employed to assist Yellowman's agenda of moral regulation in songs like "Galong Galong Galong" and "Beat it." His use of the term "God" increases and becomes interchangeable with "Jah." He started self-identifying as a Rasta, but often did so in very Christian terms, talking about Almighty God, for instance. This is in keeping with what he understands as his multi-religious identity, both Rastafarian and Catholic. Like other Rastas I have spoken to, Yellowman's understanding of God and religion falls under what Prothero calls "religious liberalism," the belief that all religions are true.

Chief among the tenets of this faith is the affirmation made famous by Mahatma Gandhi (but articulated much earlier by the theosophists, [Henry Steel] Olcott included, who influenced him) that “All Religions are True” A first corollary of this tenet is the mandate for religious tolerance (Prothero 1996, x)

Yellowman, for instance, argued that the Christian God and the Rasta God are the same, but the religions are different

Yellowman It’s just one God everybody prayer to Some people call God Jah, some say Jehovah, some say Selassie I think it the same God Selassie, Jehovah, Jesus Christ

The word “religion” is charged with negative connotation among Rastas The word is coded to refer to institutional or organized religion, such as the Catholic Church or Christianity in general Rastafari is relatively non-hierarchical and only partially organized Edmonds considers it reticulate or web-like because it is a loose collection of groups connected by personal networks and “constitutes a cohesive movement with identifiable structures and a shared ideological-symbolic-ritual ethos” (Edmonds 1998, 349) I have argued in the introduction that Yellowman is what Pollard (1994) calls an “own-built” Rasta, not belonging to an official community The move to start calling himself a Rasta was partly predicated on the fact that of the two religions that influenced his thought the most (Christianity and Rastafari), Rastafari never leveled a critique against him, as Christianity did based on sexual lyrics Rastas, however, though some may have winced at his rawness, never made his slackness an issue For this reason Rastafari appealed to Yellowman more than Christianity, but he is often careful to steer clear of the word religion

Yellowman I still consider myself Catholic with the organization, but at the same time I'm a Rasta. But not the kind of Rasta that will be confused by the religion. The only rule for me is the same God, everybody pray to same God.

Yellowman's brother-in-law, Abijah, has the same understanding of the word religion as Yellowman. A Rasta himself, Abijah grew up in Yellowman's house after Yellowman married Abijah's sister, Rosie. He is much younger than Yellowman and is currently a popular roots and culture reggae artist.<sup>109</sup> I had a chance to speak with Abijah and Yellowman at Fatis's studio in the winter of 2009 about Rastafari. Abijah's insight into Rastafari and the way many Rastas define "religion" is helpful for understanding how Yellowman conceives of himself as a Rasta.

Abijah learned of Rastafari through his father, Yellowman's father-in-law, who was a drummer with Count Ossie's Mystic Revelation of Rastafari. According to Abijah he was one of the original Rastas and was very different than contemporary Rastas—he sees him as authentic and not caught up in the outward manifestations. For instance, his father is a "beardsman," not a dreadlocks—he wears a beard like Emperor Selassie in the tradition of Rastafari under the leadership of Leonard Howell.<sup>110</sup>

Real Rastas, according to Abijah and Yellowman, do not "deal with religion," meaning organized religion. Instead, for them Rastafari is a "way of life." "Religious means to worship and he was above that," says Abijah of his father. People who are "religious" in this way "spend more time worshipping than loving each other." Irish singer Sinead O'Connor has pinpointed this very fundamental aspect of Rastafari as what for her is most appealing about the religion. Rastafari separates God from religion, meaning

---

<sup>109</sup> His song "Carry Jah Heavy Load" was on Sly and Robbie's 1998 Grammy winning album *Friends*.

<sup>110</sup> Howell was the leader of a Rasta commune called Pinnacle outside of Kingston in the forties and fifties and established many of the traditions and doctrines Rastas follow today.

you can believe in, and worship a deity without having to adhere to institutional doctrine (O'Connor 2005)

Abijah divides Rastafari into two categories: Dreadlocks and Rastas. Dreadlocks, such as the Bobo Ashanti and Twelve Tribes, are closer to organized religion, while "Rastas" are not organized. This matches Pollard's "own-built" schema. Eschewing formal organization, own-built Rastas are free to construct their own religion, drawing on examples of others, cultural influences, personal research and an innate sense of spirituality or connectedness to a higher being. In Yellowman's case, he drew on the examples of his father-in-law and other Rastafarian friends such as Familyman, Bob Marley and Joseph Hill. Other influences include his Roman Catholic upbringing and Rastafarian acculturation. For Yellowman, the feeling of connection to God or Jah is the only necessary aspect of a religious worldview.

By understanding Rastas like Yellowman using Pollard's framework, it is easier to see that there is great diversity among Rastafari, something that the available scholarship has not yet adequately represented. I have come across several people who expressed disbelief when I tell them that Yellowman is a Rasta. "But he does not have dreadlocks," they say. Or "but his music is too slack." I pressed Yellowman on this issue—how are you a Rastafarian when you do not look, or sound, the part? "Some of them don't consider me Rasta. But that what Morgan Heritage say you don't haffi dread to be Rasta." The Morgan Heritage song he is referring to—"Don't Haffi Dread"—makes it explicit that a believer need not have the physical manifestations of Rastafari to be devout. Yellowman often uses this song to legitimate that "the heart is Rasta," not the head. There is debate about this in the Rasta community, however. In response to Morgan

Heritage's song, Anthony B, a Bobo Ashanti, released "True Rastaman" His song confronts this issue directly and can be read as contesting the legitimacy of the own-built Rasta

Nobody talk 'bout baldhead Rastaman  
 Caw if you know your tradition your hear haffi grow long  
 Nobody talk 'bout Rasta inna heart  
 Heart a pump blood, a from your mind you get your thoughts  
 First step of Rasta is the Nazarene Vow  
 Then you say you mustn't nyam pig neither cow  
 Don't bend down to Babylon you mustn't bow<sup>111</sup>

Not only does the above example explicitly say that a baldhead—someone without dreadlocks—cannot be a Rasta, it also outlines other criterion for religious membership, namely dietary restrictions and the proscription against submitting to Babylon

For own-built Rastas like Yellowman, though, strict rules such as this are not mandatory The only rule is to "deal with" God, no matter what name you use "I deal with the Almighty God I deal with Jesus, I deal with Selassie 'cause I know it the same God everybody pray to They only change his name" Belonging to a religious community is also unnecessary "I don't have to go to a Bobo camp, or a Twelve Tribes meeting or a Catholic Church I just be myself"

As such, Yellowman shuns many of the outward trappings of stereotypical Rasta culture He has had dreadlocks, but they were often mixed with braids<sup>112</sup> He occasionally wears the colours associated with both Rastafari and Ethiopia red, gold and green, but these colours are ubiquitous among reggae fans and average Jamaicans On stage,

<sup>111</sup> Anthony B "True Rastaman," from *True Rastaman* (Penitentiary Records, 2008) Baldhead a person without dreadlocks The Nazarene Vow refers to the biblical Sampson, who did not cut his hair

<sup>112</sup> He lost his hair due to chemotherapy sessions and now wears it closely cropped

however, he often does wear them as a sign of his Rasta identity, something that is bolstered by his use of the common Rasta call and answer chant “Jah / Rastafari ” In fact, it is in performance that Yellowman most expresses his Rastafarian identity When I interviewed him in his house I commented on the fact that there were no obvious signs of Rastafari around no pictures of Haile Selassie, or Africa for instance For Yellowman though, these accouterments are only that, materialism, they do not prove religious affiliation or commitment In fact, echoing several conversations I had with older musicians and Rastas, Yellowman doubts that most of the newer crop of deejays that proclaim to be Rastas, and sing about Rastafari, are actually Rastas They may wear Rasta clothes, but they are, as the saying goes, “fashion dreads ”

Yellowman I don't dress like a Rasta I dress normal like everyday people

Brent Hagerman Why is that?

Y Because if you a Rasta you not supposed to let the feature or the trademark be garments or the colours The reason I say that is you have white Rasta, you have Chinese Rasta, you have African Rasta, you have Spanish Rasta

B So it's not the outward manifestation?

Y It's not the feature that make you a Rasta It's who you is religiously and physically And how you approach it and how you deal with people

B What about on stage? One of the things you always come back to on stage is saying “Jah Rastafari ”

Y Ya, because I want to let them know I am not straying away from the religion

B You seem to have an element of—I don't know if preaching is the correct word, but some sort of religious instruction on stage, telling people to be good, to love one another and end discrimination

Y Ya mon Because I don't want people believe that I am just a Rasta who people can't relate to me with their type of culture or religion I believe in a man's destiny—if a man want to be what him want to be so let it be I not going to tell

someone or a fan to be a Rasta because I am one I am not trying to convert people I'm a Rasta who is trying to let people live good Live the life they want to live but live good

Although it was not to be articulated until the nineties, in retrospect Yellowman sees this era as that in which his dominant message started to be formed That message is essentially "peace and love, unity" This message came out of a feeling of obligation to God for sparing him, what the cancer scare did was put life into close focus for Yellowman and lead to a reordering of priorities

Yellowman Because of the cancer The sickness I'm fortunate to be here so I think I'm here for a purpose and I think I should start make people understand about life and what life is, you know And how life can change because when the doctor say three years I never even think about it I just say, well if it happen it happen But, you know I know it deep in my mind it not going to be three years It became changed over the years because even this new album that I'm doing right now, 'cause this one I'm going to call *Living Legend* There's a lot of political view on that album Issue of the Middle East, immigration, people in general

Now, after the cancer scare Yellowman deepened his commitment to his audience by seeing himself in the role of teacher or preacher This is a common role for reggae artists, particularly Rasta artists or Rasta-inspired artists, who sense they have a calling to educate the people In fact, the sixties and seventies were chock full of Rastafarian reggae singers who not only espoused ethics and theology in their lyrics, but even marketed themselves as modern prophets or preachers even going so far in some cases, such as Peter Tosh, to don robes and carry staffs Reggae concerts are often imbued with highly religious symbolism—images of Haile Selassie, the African continent and Marcus Garvey for instance For Yellowman then, the turn from mere entertainer to entertainer with a social and religious consciousness, shows him following a well-worn pattern laid

out by his forebears in roots reggae

Yellowman I found that out when I went through all these surgeries that God put me here for a purpose because he make me live through it and I stay strong through it That's the reason why the people of Jamaica love me and the world love me, 'cause they know what I go through That's why they call me the king of dancehall, you understand? All over the world

During my first interview with Yellowman I asked him about whether there was a switch from slackness to culture at this time

Yellowman I start out with the sexual lyrics But growing up now, maturing, having children and responsibility because the people is my responsibility I found out all over the world people love me so I have to change a little

His desire to be a role model, both to his own children and to his fans, meant that he geared more of his material toward social responsibility He admits in the quote above that he changed "a little" But this change was not a deep structural altering of his modus operandi, only a surface treatment to make his songs sound cleaner While he continued to sing about sex after the cancer scare, he did so using cleaner words Instead of saying "pussy" or "fuck" he would say "vagina" and "sex" It is interesting how Yellowman understands this transition from what he calls X-rated material to more conscious material "I used to more sing about woman and sex but it's now politics and everything" The "everything" here seems to signify everything that is not politics, inclusive of sex and religion

At other times, however, Yellowman has denied that he has drifted away from slackness, not wanting to be seen as bowing to pressure In 1986—two years after his first bout with cancer—he assured one interviewer that he was staying the slackness course "I got a lot of criticism in my type of music, but it didn't trouble me I still move

in the same track "That's the way I have to stay, no changes" (Snowden 1986) Yellowman remained slack but often repackaged his slackness as moral instruction. Sex could still function in his songs as entertainment but now, more often than not, it also functions to demonstrate to his audience correct sexual behaviour<sup>113</sup>

Yellowman has enjoyed a long and prolific career since doctors told him he only had a few years to live in 1984. He continues to be a controversial artist because of his slackness, but newer artists have now taken his place as the subjects of local debates on slackness leading the youth astray. Yellowman now enjoys the status of an elder statesman of reggae, at home and abroad.

---

<sup>113</sup> In Section III Chapter 3 I demonstrate how Yellowman's idea of "correct" was not the Christian sexual ethics of elite society but rather the Afro-Caribbean sexual ethics, or "creole sexuality" (LaFont 2001) of lower class Jamaicans and Rastafarians.

## **SECTION III**

### **CHAPTER 1**

# **Yellowman and the Modern Body: Discourses of Race, Sex and Masculinity**

#### ***Section Introduction***

What follows are four analytical chapters that seek to understand how slackness functions in Yellowman's music. Drawing on his life story and on his considerably large catalogue of songs, I have organized this section into four interrelated arguments. I start by looking at the meaning of *dundus* in Jamaican cultural history and arguing that through slackness Yellowman subverted normative notions of sexuality, race and beauty by promoting the albino as a hypersexual object of desire. In Chapter 2 I examine how Yellowman was and is represented in the popular and scholarly press and argue that these essentialized representations considered slackness apolitical, nonreligious and amoral. I argue that Yellowman used slackness as a form of social critique to contest elite definitions of Jamaicanness and to promote a black lower class value system. In Chapter 3 I demonstrate how Yellowman employed the Jamaican discursive strategy of tracing in his slack songs for the purposes of moral regulation, espousing "correct" sexual behaviour that in itself is filtered through his understanding of himself as a Rastafarian. Finally, in Chapter 4 I show how slackness and culture are collapsed in his music and parallel this with the Rastafarian Babylon/Zion duality in order to argue that the place of sexuality and the body in Yellowman's conceptual framework breach the traditional western Christian dualism in favour of a West African model of wholeness.

### **Chapter Introduction**

There are many impoverished children in Kingston's orphanages and ghettos that are victims of Jamaica's colonial legacy. Even if he had not been an albino, Winston "Yellowman" Foster may still have grown up in government institutions. But in order to understand the extent of his disenfranchisement, I turn now to a discussion of what the phenomenon of albinism meant in Jamaican culture at the time Winston Foster was born. I will demonstrate here that Jamaican society was influenced by both African and European discriminatory practices concerning black albinos and that Winston Foster was subjected to severe racial discrimination because of this. Using Patricia Hill Collins' (2004) theory of "new racism," I will also examine how the western perceptions of the black body as abnormal and hypersexual that perpetuated racist and classist attitudes toward blacks were historically employed to label black albinos as freaks and how Yellowman embraced these sexual stereotypes for his own agenda. Finally, having presented an historical and theoretical contextual frame with which to view questions of race, class and gender, I will explicate the different ways Yellowman has understood race and used it for his own ends.

I suggest here that Yellowman's yellow body was a contested site of racial identification for Jamaican culture and meant that he had no claim to blackness or the imaginary racially homogeneous Jamaican nation. Despite his publicly reviled body, he embraced his yellowness and his albinism and was able to steer his representation in the public mind away from that of a social pariah whose sexuality was questioned or nullified, to a sort of super black man with a "modern body" and specialized sexual

talents<sup>114</sup> He accomplished this through the mobilization of stereotypes of black sexuality and the application of potent symbols of blackness such as ideologies linked with Rastafari, Ethiopianism and Pan-Africanism

### ***The Dundus, White Negroes and Black Albinos***

The word *dundus* is used in Jamaica to describe an albino or white European but it is most often employed as a term of derision. It can connote a freak or an inferior person (Cassidy 2002, 164) and one contributor to UrbanDictionary.com suggests the term means an idiot, dodo or dumb-ass (Jlaw 2007)<sup>115</sup> The term has a central African etymology derived from the Kikongo word *ndundu*, which means albino (Cassidy 2002, 164)<sup>116</sup> The possibility must be taken seriously that in an Afro-Caribbean community where scholars estimate that twenty percent of Jamaican patois is African derived,<sup>117</sup> and that Jamaican culture is essentially African culture adapted to new world conditions (Chevannes 1988, 138), the meaning of *dundus* and social constructs around albinism in Jamaica have been greatly influenced by African cultures. Altering the Mintz and Price (1992) thesis that African-based cultures in the west are syncretically constructed, Alleyne argues that Jamaican culture has two levels: a deep structure consisting of African-

---

<sup>114</sup> He also questioned society's accepted racial typology by referring to himself as, variously, yellow, white, black, or some combination thereof

<sup>115</sup> While the above definitions of *dundus* are accurate in how the term has been applied to black albinos in Jamaica and Yellowman specifically, it should also be noted that the term can be used to describe a specific dark skin/light hair phenotype. Cassidy also lists the following as a definition of *dundus*: "a darling, a much-loved one" (Ibid), but this has not been Yellowman's experience of the term

<sup>116</sup> *Ndundu* was sometimes used to describe Europeans in the Kongo, who were thought to be witches from a subterranean world that steal souls (MacGaffey 1968, 173-174)

<sup>117</sup> With the remaining eighty percent derived from English with African syntactical structure (Chevannes 1988, 138)

derived elements and a surface structure made up of elements from the other cultures that Afro-Jamaicans came in contact with (Alleyne 1988, 149) The following overview of historical attitudes toward albinism in both African and European cultures suggests the Jamaican cultural directive to discriminate against the dundus is ingrained in both the deep and surface structural memory

In some African societies albinos were considered bad luck and, as in Jamaica, were marginalized (Alidou 2005, Diawara 1998, 97) Baker and Djatou (2007) demonstrate that albinos living in sub-Saharan African societies still suffer overt discrimination based on myths and beliefs associated with the condition In South Africa, for instance, the birth of an albino child is often interpreted to mean that the family is cursed, the result of some sinful transgression committed by an ancestor (Blankenberg 2000) In Cameroon an albino child can be a consequence of transgressing social norms In other cultures the birth may be thought to be punishment for a mother's adulterous act and the child could be killed (Baker and Djatou 2007) The BBC has reported a recent spate of albino killings in Tanzania where albinos are hunted for their body parts by witchdoctors who believe them to hold supernatural powers that will make their clients rich (Allen 2008) <sup>118</sup> Celebrated Malian singer Salif Keita, who has established The Salif Keita Global Foundation for the Fair Treatment of Albinos, overcame extreme prejudice directed at his albinism, even being sent away from his father's house because of his condition He was later forced to leave school because of his poor eyesight, a condition associated with albinism, and lived as an outcast in his village (Diawara 1998) The

---

<sup>118</sup> The BBC reported 45 albinos were killed in Tanzania between December 2007 and March 2009 York cites the official count at 56 and suspects many more have died in unreported attacks (York 2010)

website for Keita's organization details some of the horrors albino children face in Africa, such as being kidnapped and even killed because they are considered bad omens (Price 2006) Keita has been quoted as saying that in Mali albino babies are sometimes sacrificed and their blood used in rituals (Hilferty 2006, Eyre 2006, Price 2006) According to Diawara, Mande kings "used to sacrifice albinos to prevent calamities from befalling their kingdoms" (Diawara 1998, 97)

The names used for albinos in Africa also tell us about the beliefs surrounding them For instance, the Bamiléké in Cameroon call albinos *meffeu* (dead), *bwongou* (strange person) and *fogtab gab* (white or chicken) Albinos among the Bamiléké are not allowed to eat white food, the consumption of chicken, pork and lamb is prohibited because these animals are considered related to the albinos and such an act would be anthropophagic (Baker and Djatou 2007) Albinos are often associated with supernatural power In the Central African Republic it is believed that they are linked to the aquatic spirit world The Pahouins from Cameroon call albinos *nmanga kon* or ghost, as they are seen as being in contact with the ancestral spirit world (Ibid) JJ Ndoudoumou, president of The World Association for the Defence of Interests and Solidarity of People with Albinism, says that albinos in Africa "are considered mystical beings, ghosts who committed sins in their first life and who, punished by God, return" (Ibid, 67) Other traditions associated with albinos include the belief among the Bakweri that albinos turn all food to poison and so one should stop eating and spit food out of their mouth if they see an albino while eating (Ibid)

In the west the phenomenon of black albinism has a history of being treated with racist and classist colonial contempt Black albinos were seen as freaks of nature by white

Europeans and Americans who were blinded to the fact that albinos of all racial backgrounds shared the same biological condition. The term albino was coined by seventeenth century Portuguese Jesuit Balthazar Tellez from the Latin *albus*, meaning “white” to describe white Africans encountered on European excursions to the west coast of Africa (Martin 2002, 5). Black albinos then, were considered wholly other from white albinos and, by extension, from white culture (Carnegie 1996). It bears repeating some of the crude language used to describe black albinos by white westerners to get a sense of the context and history that helped shape Jamaican attitudes toward people like Yellowman and why, among other things, he would be abandoned at birth because of his skin colour.

American President Thomas Jefferson, writing in 1801, described the skin of black albinos as “pallid, cadaverous white” (Jefferson 1801, 108). Edward Long’s 1774 description is even more contemptuous, especially with the addition of the object pronoun *it* to describe the albino. Long clearly views albinos as objects, and of a race and class beneath his own. “The complexion of it was a dead, dull white, resembling that of a corpse, its hair, or rather wool, a light-flaxen colour, strong, coarse, and curling, like that of a Negroe, the features were truly of the Negroe cast” (Long 1774/1970, 49-50). He goes on to offer anecdotal speculation that there is an imagined nation of albinos in central Africa called *Dondos* who are “said to be educated in the science of priestcraft, or witchcraft,” are “weak and of low stature have scarcely any sight, except by moon or owl-light” and who are at continual war with blacks (Ibid). Long casts doubts on the capability of these albinos to engage in sexual intercourse and procreation (Ibid). Long situates albinos as a nation unto themselves and serves the western ideology that people

who look different must be from a different place (Carnegie 1996) Long's discussion of the alleged impotence of albinos also connotes images of mules—animals of mixed parentage that are born infertile Carnegie (1996) tells us that black albinos in Jamaica are often the subject of debates over whether or not they have mixed (black and white) parentage It is interesting to note that the word *mulatto*, which in slave societies connoted a person of mixed parentage, comes from the Spanish word for mule Both Jefferson and Long locate their accounts of albinos in sections of their manuscripts dealing with the animal kingdom and, therefore, the non-human world (Carnegie 1996, 476)

It is telling that sixteenth and seventeenth century white writers did not connect the phenomenon of albinism in Africans to the same in caucasians, but chose to view it as an African peculiarity Jordan (1977) calls this lack of scientific objectivity an example of the ethnocentrism of the age Since whites in plantation societies classified humans based on skin colour, with dark skin separating slave from planter, a white African could upset this classificatory system and seriously undermine the colonial logic of Africans as other and Europeans as normal In order not to threaten the class schema, it became necessary for writers of the period to ensure that black and white albinos were not seen to represent the same physiological peculiarity because this would have admitted “a bond and a similarity between the so-called races that was unacceptable in the social order” (Carnegie 1996, 478)

Martin's research into the proliferation of images and attitudes toward what he calls “white negros” in popular culture reveals that they captivated the European imagination Black albinos and Africans with vitiligo, a skin condition that causes the

progressive loss of pigment, leaving light or whitish spots and blotches, were treated as curiosities and spectacles for early colonists, and displayed like circus freaks for the gaze of the European elite who were mesmerized by bodily difference

At first, explorers, plantation owners, and medical doctors shipped the transforming bodies of white Negroes back to Europe as a New World wonder, sometimes they commissioned paintings or engravings to circulate as artefacts of the endless variety found in colonial possessions White Negroes [sic] were showcased in the exhibition spaces of seventeenth-century London, before the Royal Philosophical Society, in the salons of eighteenth-century Paris, and later at English fairs (Martin 2002, 8)

Woodcuts, photographs, lithographs, and etchings of albinos with titles like “Primrose, the Celebrated Piebald Boy,” were made for an audience hungry to see “exotic” bodies <sup>119</sup> At the Bartholomew Fair souvenir coins bearing the likeness of an “Albino Negress,” or copper plates engraved with George Alexander, the “spotted boy,” could be purchased In America, black albinos were also the cause of marvel as they or their likenesses were displayed in taverns, national history museums, Barnum’s American Museum and philosophical societies An advertisement for P T Barnum’s American Museum read “A Negro Turning White! He is said to have discovered a weed, the juice of which changes the Colored Skin to White” (Ibid , 59) Barnum’s spectacles included “Negro Turning White,” “Leopard Child” and “Leopard Boy” Both the Ringling Brothers and Barnum and Bailey created sensational histories to promote their exhibits, such as the “Ambassadors from Mars,” two dreadlocked albino brothers dubbed Eko and Iko (Ibid , 172) In Boston the Lowell Museum hosted a minstrel show featuring “The Four Snow-White Albino Boys,” playing fiddle, tambo, bones and banjo (Ibid , 90) In

---

<sup>119</sup> Piebald refers to skin marked by vitiligo or patches of white

the United States these exhibitions were overlaid with pseudo-scientific concerns about “the nature and potential mutability of racial difference, worries over slavery and miscegenation, and yearnings for a national identity” (Ibid , 11) Not only did black albinos stymie attempts to fix binary black and white racial categories, there was concern that “black skin could turn white and the African American could become indistinguishable from the European” (Ibid , 2)

### ***The Dundus in Jamaican Cultural History***

Carnegie tells us that albinos are treated as abnormal people in Jamaica, bordering on social menace because of their difference which, in a country suffering from the vestiges of racial and class stratifications put in place by hegemonic colonial powers, finds them at the bottom of the social strata (Carnegie 1996) They are culturally displaced A dundus child, then, is anathema “the albino’s interstitial social positioning is marked by features commonly associated with taboo anxiety, danger and inhibition” (Ibid , 480)<sup>120</sup> For Jamaicans, an albino’s location in society is assumed to be with the impoverished and disenfranchised, anecdotal cultural knowledge, Carnegie suggests, would assume that albinos are most often seen fully clothed so as not to expose their body to ridicule, poorly dressed, looking for handouts on the street and assuming a subordinate tone of voice and body language to all passersby (Ibid , 471) Albinos are not usually entitled to well-paid jobs and positions with influence, Yellowman has stated that before he brought albinism into the spotlight, it was rare to see albinos in public and

---

<sup>120</sup> Carnegie borrows these categories from Leach (1964)

never in professional jobs Jamaican producer and drummer Sly Dunbar corroborates this and says that Yellowman's success was an anomaly in Jamaica because most Jamaicans at the time assumed albinos had no prospects, especially in the music industry (Dunbar 2009)

Racial politics is paramount when discussing both Yellowman and albinism in Jamaica Race and ethnicity play a dominant role in the politics of identification for Carib peoples, even more so than class (Alleyne 2005) The meanings of phenotypical categories such as hair type and skin colour were socially constructed during the colonial period and this legacy remains in the Caribbean The slave trade did not create racism, but racial categories emerged in Europe during antiquity and were then transferred to the Caribbean where they became entrenched (Ibid ) Society was hierarchically structured with lighter skin at the top and blacker skin at the bottom Power and political control have historically remained in the hands of European-descended light-skinned minorities on the island, while darker colour and Africanness has been relegated to society's bottom stratum (Sobo 1993)

The Jamaican social system has been characterized as a color and class system in which people rank each other, both conceptually and practically (as in hiring practices and marriage preferences), according to skin color This system grew out of slavery and colonialism The social structure can be visualized as a pyramid in which a small white elite at the top is supported by a large base of blacks Brown-skinned individuals of mixed European and African ancestry are generally in the middle (Ibid , 22)

Yellowman's position in society is located in a sort of purgatory between white and black without being able to legitimately claim either, or even mulatto status He stands outside the neatly defined and socially enforced colour boundaries In Jamaican racial terms he is

not white—his African heritage confirms this, neither is he black, his skin colour is proof of that. Even though Yellowman's skin is a light colour, the historical meaning of the albino negated any privilege he may have enjoyed because of this and in effect tossed him to the very bottom of the Jamaican social pyramid.

What the dundus lacks is "blackness" in any of its permissible shadings, he is therefore seen either as lacking, as reflecting poorly on, or as letting down "the race." Moreover, in the popular imaginary—and rather more ambiguously in official national ideology—blackness has gradually become one of the fundamental attributes of Jamaican nationality (Carnegie 1996, 472).

Yellowman has said that he considers himself both white and black, even though his parents were black, but admits that others often questioned his blackness. The racial slurs that he was subjected to throughout his life confirm this, he was maligned as "buckra," "red bwoy,"<sup>121</sup> "red dog" and "yellow dog." At Alpha Boys School he was usually referred to as "white man." Later at Eventide home, that was changed to "yellow man." During this time a walk down any street in Kingston would cause onlookers to shout out, "Hey, yellow man"—a constant reminder to the teenager that blackness was denied to him by society.

Several of his songs address the *ad hominem* attacks he suffered because of his colour. Often the narratives in these songs are constructed as racial warfare with black against yellow, furthering the detailed racially striated categorizes that were created during slavery. Yellowman complains about blacks in various songs, often heightening

---

<sup>121</sup> In folk use the colour "red," as in "red man," includes orange and yellow (Cassidy 2002). The use of *bwoy* or *bwat* [boy] calls into question the subject's age and level of maturation (Carnegie 1996).

his counter assault by using the derisive term “nigger”<sup>122</sup> “Why nigger people bad-minded so?” or “No nigger can fight ’gainst I dem a see me pon de road dem a fight ’gainst I / Me go inna de dance they wan see me die” (from “Them a Fight I”) In “Why Them a Fight” he makes it clear that the reason for the disharmony is colour “Why them a fight I so? / A true me a yellow and them a negro ” This is a theme he returns to often, but instead of presenting himself as a helpless victim he takes matters into his own hands and offers self-aggrandizing reasons why people would fight against him, usually centred on the fact that other singers are jealous because of his talent and fame In “Them a Fight I” these include the fact that he has “a good tone of voice”, and “when me start chat” the audience is so impressed they “want fe hear me twice”, that he is a star, that he is “sweet like sugar and spice”, and his diversity on the microphone—“him a deal you inna all kind a style ” In “King of the Crop” he offers a dedication in the introduction “to all of dem man who want to fight against Yellowman,” specifically talking about rival deejays who made racially motivated statements against him The song’s lyrics reprobate the racists for not realizing Yellowman’s dominance of dancehall Nuff dutty nigger wan see Yellow drop / They never know Yellow a de king of the crop ” The song underlines the paradox of his social positioning if he had not attempted social advancement his rivals would have taunted him for being lazy

The racial binary between black and yellow in these songs is quickly dismantled in other lyrics where Yellowman either presents himself as better than black, both black

---

<sup>122</sup> The *Dictionary of Jamaican English* has this to say about nigger or *nayga* “the term is avoided by whites, and resented among negroes if used of them by whites As used among negroes it is a term more or less derogatory, commonly implying extra blackness, backwardness, laziness, stupidity, etc (Cassidy 2002, 317) Yellowman’s use of the term suggests to his detractors that he a) must be black because only a black person is socially sanctioned to use the term in the off-handed way he does, and b) that there are levels of blackness and he situates himself above his critics

and yellow, or wholly black. In fact, what we see from Yellowman's lyrics is that he plays with racial categories for his own benefit and the entertainment of his audience, sometimes resisting or mocking them and at other times reinforcing or embodying them. Race was used against him all his life, his identity was essentialized around it. He internalized and adopted that essentialization but radically altered the meaning of his skin colour in doing so. While in many songs he speaks from the position of a black man, in other songs he locates himself as an albino which, in his revalorization, becomes something of a super black man. In the song "Jah Jah Made Us for a Purpose," for instance, he asks why people always wonder where he gets his colour from. His answer—"it's from the whole a one"—draws on Jamaica's national motto, "Out of Many, One People."

There's one thing Yellowman can't understand  
 Who make the whole a dem a cuss me bout me nation?  
 A talk bout whe me get fe me colour from  
 A pity dem don't know it's from the whole a one  
 —Yellowman, "Jah Jah Made Us for a Purpose"

The song not only confirms the albino's position in Jamaican nationality (or contests his designation as marginal to the nation) but also uses religion to legitimate his colour, by saying God made him that way for a reason, and presents albinos as one integral aspect of the "many" in the motto alongside the "Chiney man"<sup>123</sup> and the "black man" mentioned later in the song.

Carnegie has shown that under the nationalizing project this motto has come to mean that disparate racial strains have been distilled into one black nation (Carnegie

---

<sup>123</sup> *Chiney* is a common term to describe members of the Chinese-Jamaican population in Jamaica.

1996) Jamaica is imagined as a racially homogenized nation, a fictional homogeneity that refashions the colour black in the Jamaican flag, originally intended to signify hardships surpassed, for the colour of the majority (Ibid )<sup>124</sup> Yet the albino, who is often subjected to xenophobic-like taunts of “Russian man” or “German man,” is “denied the possibility of Jamaican nationality and placed outside the body politic” (Ibid , 487, 496) It is not surprising, then, that a child born without nation and without race would also end up parentless Yellowman humorously rejects this reading in favour of interpreting the motto the way it was originally meant that the one nation is constructed from diversity and not that the diversity has merged into one

But whereas Yellowman can chat at length about his yellowness, he just as easily uses conspicuous symbols to instantiate his own blackness and, vis-à-vis Carnegie’s argument, his legitimate place in the Jamaican nation In “Step It Out A Babylon” he situates himself as an African and a Rastaman by invoking the symbols of Haile Selassie as Jah Rastafari and repatriation out of the west back to the African homeland In the song, Selassie and his African angels come to Babylon to free the black people and carry them back to Africa/Zion Rastafari is a religion born out of the suffering of lower class black Jamaicans so by aligning himself with it, especially in conjunction with the African nation<sup>125</sup> and an African monarch who himself represented black nationalism and African strength to his widespread supporters in the black diaspora, Yellowman is being conspicuous about claiming blackness Add to this the fact that in the diaspora blackness has become a “sign of Africanity” (Appiah 1992, 3) and Yellowman’s dual deployment of

---

<sup>124</sup> This association of black with hardship was officially annulled in 1997 when the House of Representatives offered a new definition for the colour “strength and creativity” (Senior 2003, 349)

<sup>125</sup> By “African nation” I do not mean country but rather the imagined homeland of those in the African diaspora

symbols of Africa and blackness confirm for his audience that he is not trading in blackness for yellowness. He is, in fact, both. This is also apparent in the song "Stand Up For Your Rights" where Yellowman explains to his audience that he is still an African, even though his skin is a different colour. "The whole a we come from the African land / Although Yellowman have a different complexion."

Further to this, Yellowman caused a shift in reggae's firmament due to his treatment of blackness. Previous to his arrival, reggae was racially scripted, privileging and promoting blackness. Manuel (1995) says that reggae helped to mainstream black identity by celebrating the Afro-Caribbean aspects of the music and culture. After Bob Marley, Jamaicans "felt proud to be black as never before" (Ibid, 236). And yet, a few short years later, Yellowman questioned the parameters of this blackness and exploded carefully constructed notions of what blackness meant. By contesting normative definitions of blackness and expanding them to include an albino, Yellowman may have set the stage for the acceptance of other reggae artists that also did not fit the tightly defined notion of reggae singer in the seventies such as Purpleman, UB40, and contemporary artists like Gentleman and Matisyahu.

At the bootlegged 1987 Negril concert that was later sold under the name *Slackness Versus Pure Culture*, Charlie Chaplin defended the black albino's acceptance into the imagined black nation. In the song "Jah Me Fear" he chats "the whole of us black although some look clear," an obvious allusion to Yellowman who was standing on stage beside him at the time, as the word "clear" here refers to light skin complexion (Cassidy 2002). In the song, Yellowman takes over deejaying using Chaplin's chorus of "Jah Me Fear" and his lyrics continue the portrayal of himself as a black man. He first condemns

the South African apartheid and complacency of white South Africans toward it, and then adds “Government Jamaica act like them care / Treat black people the same everywhere / Oppression we go through you can’t compare” The “we” not only counts Yellowman among the black nation, but, in conjunction with his stance against apartheid, allows him to stand in solidarity with Africans worldwide against racism. At the same time it allows him to separate himself from white culture in case there is any doubt that he might be white, or is “letting down the race” or “playing white” because of his fame and fortune (Alleyne 2005, 238). His many songs about Africa—“Free Africa,” “Freedom,” “African Drum,” “Africa”—also serve to instantiate his own Africanness and allow him to claim an ideological lineage from black nationalism, Garveyism and Rastafari.

His later use of the trope of oppositionality to white culture in the song “Weed Dem” also works as a device to make clear the fact that he is a) not white and b) a person with yellow complexion who is a full member of the black nation. Christianity is also used here as a racial indicator, it is considered white religion, evident in the song by its connection with the slave trade and colonialism, while Rastafari is black religion.

Me a tell you black people know about Jesus  
 Back in the slavery days we a know about that  
 When white man control everything we have  
 We used to wear them clothes we used to feed them hog  
 We used to go a church and praise the white man God

A me named Yellowman now watch me complexion  
 You know me are the true Rastaman  
 Selassie I me praise and you know me no gaze<sup>126</sup>  
 Him guide me through twenty-two years  
 All of me success all of me glory unto all me fame  
 —Yellowman, “Weed Dem”

---

<sup>126</sup>As in to not turn your head or gaze upon something other than Selassie

The song situates Yellowman as a true Rasta, and a yellow one at that, over and against people who have adopted white Christian traditions and beliefs. Unlike his much earlier “Fools Go to Church,” however, he is careful to not denigrate Christianity wholesale. He purposely targets slavery-era Christianity because, as he explained to me, “I don’t try to be against Christianity.” His later songs have an ecumenical agenda and are careful not to condemn other religions or belief systems. He gradually moves from the “white God” versus “black God” binary to a universalized position where there is only one God with different names.<sup>127</sup> This understanding of God is fully formed by 1993’s “One God” off the *A Man You Want* album.

Yellowman’s racial ideology follows a similar pattern as his religious thought. While earlier songs find him explicitly adopting blackness and/or yellowness, in later songs he takes on a more universal approach, representing himself as a man for all races and religions. Lyrics such as “Me rock the white and me rock the black / Me rock the baldhead and dreadlock”<sup>128</sup> are indicative of later material that attempts to not only position himself as a link between white and black, Christian and Rasta, but also is a platform from which to condemn racism. While introducing “Holy Mount Zion” in San Francisco in 1998 he told the audience “Remember, no racism, no discrimination no discrimination of any nation”<sup>129</sup>

By exploding racial colour categories and critiquing their validity Yellowman has actually fashioned a privileged position for himself. He can speak from the point of view of a black man and include himself in the black nation, but he can also position himself as

---

<sup>127</sup> I return to this idea in Section III Chapter 4

<sup>128</sup> From “Coming in from the Cold,” *Live at Maritime Hall*, 1998

<sup>129</sup> From *Live at Maritime Hall*

an intermediary between white and black (as in the “no racism” epithets at his concerts) or as a sort of super sexual yellow man, as I shall discuss below I now turn to what this means for Yellowman as a Rastafarian

### ***Thank You Jah Jah fe Give Me This A Colour: Race and Rastafari***

Read against Rastafarian attitudes of race and nationality Yellowman’s project of “blackening” his representation is even more salient The Rastas’ cognitive model of the universe is a set of binaries Babylon/Zion, Africa/Europe, black/white As a black nationalist movement influenced by Marcus Garvey’s black pride, Ethiopianism and Pan-Africanism and, more recently, America’s black power movement, blackness is a crucial site of identity negotiation in Rastafari Rastas trace their lineage through Haile Selassie, a black African understood as Christ incarnate, and their devil/anti-Christ is the Catholic pope, a white European (Yawney 1976) This dichotomous model of black and white leaves no room for albinism Yawney, who conducted fieldwork among the Rastafari in the early seventies, provides insight into the attitudes about race and nationalism during the time Yellowman was becoming a teenager While not speaking about albinos, Yawney does talk about another group in Jamaica that has historically been racially constructed/categorized as “yellow”—the Chinese According to the Rasta version of African/European history the whites and Chinese were expelled from Ethiopia / the Garden of Eden / the Kingdom of Zion / Israel (they are one in the same) (Ibid , 247) <sup>130</sup>

---

<sup>130</sup> In this version of history the white race is created by a union between Eve, a black woman, and the snake, a white man The ensuing daughter and her half-brother Cain create the Chinese race Eve’s mixed race daughter is referred to by Yawney as a “buffer pickney” “the product of the overlapping of black and

The Chinese in particular, cause a problem for the Rasta's dichotomous thinking

In light of the incommensurability of yellow, in terms of a model of black and white polar opposites, it is interesting to note that the Rastas express difficulty in imaging how the Chinese "sex each other," so they cannot understand how they reproduce. Here the folk belief of the Rastas is of a different order than their daily experiences. The Chinese are not denied sexuality as such but the cognitive paradigm of the Rastas does not permit the Chinese to reproduce. As bearers of the mark of Cain, yellow should be a sterile hybrid in terms of the dichotomous model of black and white (Yawney 1976, 251)

Bearing in mind the stereotypes surrounding albinism and sexuality outlined above, the Chinese paradigm is helpful for thinking about the cultural context Yellowman grew up in. If, to Rastas, yellow skin represented an unreconciled contradiction to their worldview and was seen as an impediment to reproduction and, therefore, masculinity, Yellowman's discussion of race was not only consequential, it was necessary in order to claim blackness and allegiance to Rastafari. Perhaps this is why one of his first songs to mention Jah is a homily on the need to accept different races into not just the Jamaican national consciousness but also Rastafari cosmology. He charges "some a dem judge me fe me yellow colour" and then begins to explain why race should not come between people

I want everybody to understand  
 Jah Jah made us for a purpose  
 He make the Yellowman for a purpose  
 He make the Chiney man for a purpose  
 He make the black man for a purpose  
 —Yellowman, "Jah Jah Made Us for a Purpose"

Yellowman does not explicate exactly what the purpose of each race is but it is enough

---

white, not the merging of black and white. The buffer pickney represents the unresolved presence of opposites. Here black and white continue to exist in unreconciled form, in contradiction" (Yawney 1976, 244, 247)

for him to implicate a divinely predetermined fate Yellowman has a place in society because Jah gave him a role to play Further in the song Yellowman makes an important shift Moving from a position of defending his colour, he begins to celebrate it unabashedly “Glory glory hallelujah / Thank you Jah Jah fe give me this a colour” Just as Yellowman would turn his despised skin colour into an aphrodisiac in his songs, he also draws on religion—both Christian and Rasta—to legitimate his equal status in society and win over his audience

### ***Lady Saw, Shabba Ranks and Yellowman: Dancehall’s Sexual Politics***

The descriptions of black albinos offered by Thomas Jefferson (1801) and Edward Long (1774) above share similarities with narratives used to represent the body of Sarah Baartman, a South African Khoi woman otherwise known as the Hottentot Venus Baartman was exhibited in a cage, nearly naked, in London and Paris in the early nineteenth century as a form of entertainment for white Europeans Pseudo-scientific descriptions sought to distance Baartman, and by association all blacks, from whites by labelling her a “freak” The meanings of the term freak “are situated at the crossroads of colonialism, science and entertainment” and has stemmed from a usage to depict Africans as non-human, primitive, animalistic, wild, violent and uncivilized (Collins 2005, 120) Particularly, freak has been mobilized in popular culture to connote so called deviant or kinky sexuality The European fascination with Baartman was centred on her sexuality—the size and shape of her buttocks, pubis and breasts—and was indicative of western perceptions of African bodies as abnormal and sexually deviant

Through colonial eyes, the stigma of biological Blackness and the seeming primitiveness of African cultures marked the borders of extreme abnormality. For Western sciences that were mesmerized by body politics, White Western normality became constructed on the backs of Black deviance, with an imagined Black hypersexual deviance at the heart of the enterprise (Ibid , 120)

Drawing on Foucault (1990, 1997) Douglas has argued that white society's preoccupation with black sexuality is about more than just fear and fascination. Rather, it is an attempt to maintain their power over black culture (Douglas 1999). Foucault's work on sexuality and power suggests that power can be exerted over people through regulation of their bodies, their perceptions of their bodies and their reproductive capacity. Power can be achieved and maintained because sexuality can act as a mechanism by which humans can be categorized and divided into groupings. To question a group's sexuality is to validate/bolster one's own superiority (Ibid). In the west sexuality is integrally linked to a person's self-image and their humanity so to attack a person's sexuality is an assault on their humanity. Therefore, for white society to control black people's sexuality/bodies/reproductivity is to control them as people.

Collins traces the European mindset that mapped black bodies as sexually deviant back to the case of Baartman, the European-constructed myths of black hypersexuality, for instance, were predicated on the notion that whiteness was normal and blackness was abnormal. In the absence of objective scientific inquiry, "stereotypes were invented, reinforced, and sexual ideals emerge[d] based on half-truths, rumors, and anecdotes" (LaFont 2001, paragraph 18). The spectacle of displaying Baartman as a primitive freak, and the insistence of western biologists to claim her remains in the interest of science,<sup>131</sup>

---

<sup>131</sup> Though Baartman died in 1816 her remains were not repatriated to South Africa until 2002

invoked for her audience “sexual meanings that [gave] shape to racism, sexism, class exploitation, and heterosexism” (Collins 2005, 27) Baartman’s commodification and objectification, based on exoticized and eroticized images of colour and body type, facilitated beliefs in white superiority and helped establish black sexuality as freakish

Collins parallels Baartman’s case with contemporary images of black sexuality to show how very little has changed. The term freak still shows up in popular culture to depict black sexuality (in the songs of Rick James, Missy Elliott and Beyoncé, for instance) and black women are routinely reduced to body parts in advertising, film, music videos and song lyrics.<sup>132</sup> The construction of racialized identities is the hallmark of what Collins calls the “new racism”—sexualizing racial difference. New technologies, such as mass media, play a significant role in reinforcing racial-sexual stereotypes and the mapping of black males as bucks, brutes and rapists, black women as promiscuous and fertile, and black sexuality as funky or freakish. Mass media disseminates ideologies needed to justify racism by manufacturing the consent that makes new racism appear to be natural, normal and inevitable (Collins 2005)

The significance of Collins’ work for Jamaican popular culture in particular hinges on the fact that dancehall is the predominant source of public discourse on black sexuality in Jamaica, and as such has tremendous power in forming popular opinion around sex and the body. In Jamaican dancehall contradictions around sexual stereotypes abound. While scholars have offered very little analysis of Yellowman’s sexual discourse, there has been work on dancehall artists such as Lady Saw and Shabba Ranks, both of whom were substantially influenced by Yellowman’s slackness and his ability,

---

<sup>132</sup> Particularly “booty,” a term that Collins links to both sexuality and plunder

particularly in Shabba Ranks' case, to bring slack dancehall to mainstream non-Jamaican audiences<sup>133</sup> The scholarly analysis of these two artists is instructive when looking at Yellowman

On the surface Lady Saw's use of erotic performance and hypersexual narratives appear to be examples of the internalizing of the new racism in the marketplace, yet, as Cooper (2004) points out, the female deejay does not simply reproduce oppressive stereotypes uncritically. Instead her music is best understood as affirming feminine sexual power. Her insistence that her on-stage persona is only an act complicates the notion that she is objectified or somehow a victim of sexist patriarchy. Her "spectacular performance of the role of 'Lady Saw'" is a "calculated decision by the actress to make the best of the opportunity to earn a good living in the theatre of dancehall" (Cooper 2004, 100). Lady Saw is in control of her own representation, off stage she is private citizen Marian Hall and has the agency to determine the scope and character of Lady Saw's performance. Saw is astute at using black sexual stereotypes to her own economic and social advantage. Her stage show blatantly feeds racist tropes such as the sexually insatiable black woman and reduces black femininity to the vagina "Best Pum Pum," "Pretty Pussy," "Stab Out Mi Meat," and black masculinity to the penis "Life Without Dick," "Good Wuk," "Do Me Better." Yet Lady Saw uses slackness as a discursive device to empower women ("Power of the Pum," "Man is the Least") and her ability to sing about taboo topics, for instance, extends beyond crude bedroom vignettes to socially significant songs about infertility ("No Less Than a Woman") and safe sex ("Condom"). And the

---

<sup>133</sup> To many critics, Lady Saw has surpassed the slackness of Yellowman "she went to the bottom of the pit and came up with sheer filth and vulgar lyrics which made Yellow Man at his worst seem like a Boy Scout" (Pilgrim 1993, 49)

very fact that she is a female slack deejay contests traditional definitions of dancehall, slackness and the deejay trade as exclusive locations for male actors. Simply by being Lady Saw she inverts patriarchy. She also actively denies colonial Christian-derived roles of femininity and sexuality.

DJ Lady Saw epitomizes the sexual liberation of many African Jamaican working-class women from airy-fairy Judaeo-Christian definitions of appropriate female behavior. In a decisive act of feminist emancipation, Lady Saw cuts loose from the burdens of moral guardianship" (Ibid , 100)

Hope (2006) argues that dancehall offers women, both artists and fans, a measure of privilege through their sexuality and they can use it to conquer engendered racist and sexist regimes that are the consequence of colonialism. Many women prefer the status, freedom and financial benefits that come from dancehall to the traditional minimum wage employment opportunities "because their levels of education and training negate their abilities to access any positions that would attract significant remuneration" (Hope 2006, 74). For Hope, Lady Saw is able to use dancehall and slackness to contest traditional Jamaican hierarchical ideologies of gender, race, class and colour. Her gender, dark skin colour and her impoverished rural lower-class background traditionally place her at the bottom of Jamaican society, yet through slackness she has gained immense popularity as one of dancehall's top performers (Ibid )

Following Hope, Tafari-Ama (2006) has demonstrated how lower class black women in Kingston's ghettos are treated as sexual booty but that they, in turn, have recognized the power of their bodies and have used this for their own social and material gain. In fact, the sexualized female body is one of the only resources available to this community.

Lady Saw then, uses stereotypes based on sexuality, race, and gender but arguably nullifies and redefines them through agency over her own body and the fact that her financial success gives her further control over her destiny

Similarly, Grammy winner Shabba Ranks followed in the footsteps of Yellowman by reducing black bodies to genitalia (“Needle Eye Pum Pum,” “Flesh Axe”) and embodying race-based stereotypes of black men as conquerors of female booty (“Love Punnany Bad,” “Wicked Inna Bed,” “Trailer Load a Girls”) Yet Cooper’s (2004) insightful interrogation of representations of female sexuality in the work of Bob Marley and Shabba Ranks show how Shabba undermines white society’s stereotypes of black sexuality as inferior by promoting black women’s full-figured bodies as beautiful<sup>134</sup> She argues that Shabba promotes a sexual equality of the genders, and “exhorts women to control the ‘commodification’ of their body and ensure that men value them appropriately This constitutes a radical politics and economics of the sexual body” (Cooper 2004, 81) And by promoting slackness in the media Shabba “destabilizes the social space of the respectable middle class” (Ibid , 81) Shabba’s X-rated lyrics are decried by critics as sexist, misogynist and chauvinistic but, according to Cooper, they do not amount to a wholesale devaluation of female sexuality Rather they embrace Afrocentric beauty standards and confront repressive European morés that seek to stifle sexual discourse and activity “they signal the reclamation of active, adult female sexuality from the entrapping passivity of sexless Victorian virtue” (Ibid , 86)

Media is a key site where new racism is both contested and reinforced (Collins 2005) As such, dancehall music can also be read as a loci for the dismantling of new

---

<sup>134</sup> Marley, conversely, is found to have far more conservative sexual politics

racism and classism Slackness in dancehall, then, should not be taken at face value as necessarily oppressive to women and perpetuating racist stereotypes around sexuality

### ***Yellowman with the Modern Body***

Long before Shabba Ranks and Lady Saw made headlines, Yellowman disrupted polite society by offsetting racial hierarchies and proliferating hardcore X-rated slackness He, in part, entertained one segment of society by agitating another He satirized embedded mainstream cultural understandings of race and sexuality with the intent of poking holes in their colonial logic and fashioning a place in the social sphere for himself His sexual content, broadcast to anyone within earshot of a tape deck, soundsystem or record player, was geared toward upsetting mainstream society as much as it was pleasing ghetto dwellers One of Yellowman's salient critiques of normative definitions of albinism happens around his deployment of black sexuality in relation to Collins' discussion Whereas slavery era descriptions of black albinos questioned their sexual validity and Jamaican cultural stereotypes mapped albino bodies with images of abnormality and ugliness, Yellowman embraced western stereotypes of black sexuality and reinvented himself as a sex symbol, the ultimate object of desire for all women On the one hand he is desirable because society knows black men are well endowed and sexually insatiable, so the western narrative goes On the other hand, he positions himself as even more desirable than a black man by espousing the heightened sexual potency of the albino It is here that the true genius of Yellowman's project is revealed the lowly dundus is reinvented as the ultimate Casanova In the process Yellowman again skews the

racialized reading of sexuality by calling his yellow body the “modern body” and telling his audience of his desirable attributes

I gwaan tell you why de girls they love de yellow body  
 When me discharge, me discharge honey  
 Yellowman with the modern body  
 —Yellowman, “Sit Under You”

Not only can we see this racism and class exploitation blatantly in the writings of Jefferson and Long, but it is the very same that has informed society’s treatment of Winston Foster. He too was a victim of western perceptions of abnormality directed at the black and black albino body. The state was in actual control of his physical whereabouts for two decades but racist and classist cultural pressures sought to control his representation as well. We can see just how much Yellowman internalized the lesson that an attack on one’s sexuality is an attack on their humanity by looking at some of his lyrics. Society questioned his sexuality as an albino and this put him in a position where he had to fight to maintain control of his body and prove his sexual (and heterosexual) credentials and reproductive viability. Several of Yellowman’s lyrics boast about his sexual prowess. In “Yellowman Wise” Yellowman calls himself the wisest man who “knows the secret of a ooman” and that is why he have “nuff ooman.” In several songs he playfully puts to rest any rumour that he has no girlfriend. In “100 Sexy Girls” he assures his listener that “All of the girls they want a piece of me.” In “World of Girls” he lists all the countries where his girlfriends live. In “Zungguzungguguzungguzeng” he offers as proof the fact that women he has slept with have albino children.

Caw nuff a dem a talk ’bout me nuh have nuh girlfriend  
 Yuh a idiot bwoy, me have a hundred and ten

Say all a dem, dem have yellow children  
 —Yellowman, “Zungguzungguguzunggzeng”

“Girlfriend” assures his listeners that he has more girlfriends than “all the man dem ”

Me a go see outta we or all the man dem  
 Which one a we have the most girlfriends  
 Me have girl over deso, girl over yaso  
 Girl up deso and girl down deso  
 Say east, west, north and south whe me go  
 From Texas to Colorado  
 From L A to San Diego  
 From 'Frisco down to Mexico  
 From New York to Toronto  
 Not to mention Puerto Rico  
 Back to Aruba and Curacao  
 The girls dem a love me from my head to me toe  
 —Yellowman, “Girlfriend”

Another lyric also confirms his success with the opposite sex

Look how she fat a Yellow control that  
 You look pon me head me hair it plait  
 There's a 100 and 25 girls do that  
 —Yellowman, “Yellowman a the Lover Boy”

Not only does Yellowman exaggerate the number of girls he has, he also makes sure that his critics know that he is in a position of power over them. By putting another in a subordinate position he exercises his own superiority. The word “control” has a double meaning, besides having power over something, it also implies ownership.

Constant boasting and machismo is nothing new for Jamaican deejays but I suggest here that Yellowman's sex-centric lyrics can be read as a validation of his virility in light of the fact that society deemed albinos sexually questionable. His attempt to validate his sexuality is an attempt to gain back control of his body and representation.

from society Yellowman was known as the slackest deejay of his day, he sang more often about sex, and in greater graphic detail than any other deejay Perhaps this was because he had more to prove and more at stake Arguably Yellowman could not have achieved the level of acceptance in Jamaica that he did without employing slackness He first had to confront society's discriminatory assumptions about his skin colour and what better way to do that than attacking head on the myth of the impotent albino? Inherent in many of the jeers and taunts Winston suffered growing up was a denial of manhood Calling him "bwoy" questioned his masculinity and therefore his ability to be sexually active In Jamaican culture men prove their masculinity by how sexually potent they are (Sobo 1993) Dancehall is filled with songs about how long a man can last in bed or how many women he can "service" Yellowman's "Nuff Punanny" is a good example "'Tan pon it long, Tan pon it long / Gal nowadays want no five second man / Gal nowadays want a five hour man / Big and strong, like Yellowman" In "Bubble With Me Ting" he takes up a similar theme, espousing his exhaustive regime in the bedroom "Make love from one go straight to nine" Yellowman's boasts of virility and endurance are especially important when taking into consideration his need to substantiate masculinity in the face of stereotypes that portrayed albinos as impotent and adolescent

It is not specific to Jamaican popular culture for males to boast about generous pubic endowments but Yellowman takes it to a ridiculous level, just as he humorously over exaggerates the number of sexual partners he has or his stamina in the bedroom beyond any humanly possible level Again, this can be read as Yellowman going beyond hypersexual stereotypes of blackness and mapping yellowness with an even greater sexual appetite It is part of his agenda to represent the yellow body as the super black

body A further example from “Bubble With Me Ting” demonstrates this

When me roll out me Yellow sometng  
 The gal look pon me say it’s a goddamn sin  
 Your Yellow sometng could a never go in  
 —Yellowman, “Bubble With Me Ting”

The theme is continued in “Wreck a Pum Pum,” itself an allusion to rough sex and the damage a large penis could do to a vagina

Me draw down me pants, go down to me knee  
 She look under me and say “God almighty”  
 Yellowman you going use that thing pon me?  
 I said “shut your mouth it is only 10 feet”  
 —Yellowman, “Wreck a Pum Pum”

One overarching characteristic of most slackness in Caribbean popular music is its genderization. Dancehall is not alone in its genderized narratives that at once reflect and reinforce gender roles and stereotypes—whether real or imagined—in Caribbean society. Calypso, like dancehall, is male dominated and its slackness is often manifested as narratives of female sexual conquest, boasts of physical endowment, desirability and corital talent or the creation of machismo at the expense of fellow males or the opposite sex (Warner 1985). And like dancehall, calypso has historically cast the female as a pure sexual object, denigration and degradation of women for the purposes of inflating the male ego are common to both dancehall and calypso. “The calypsonian constantly denigrates the very female partner who allows him to fulfill his sexual ambitions” (Ibid, 120). Calypsonians are sure to gain audience approval for degrading women, Hodge says this is part of Trinidad’s social roles. “the embarrassment of woman is part of the national ethos” (Hodge 1974, 117).

Hope (2006) argues that the female body and female sexuality is a site of male identity negotiation in dancehall—males seek to conquer the punanny and situate themselves in a position of power over women. This is evident in lyrics about how many women a deejay has, how many children he has produced from different women, and in songs that portray a war between two women over a man. Yellowman's lyrics certainly support Hope's findings. He further uses the female body as a site of identity negotiation to redress the albino's lowly state in society, thereby perpetuating stereotypes of feminine black sexuality, denying women any sort of sexual agency and further instantiating the subordinate status of the female in dancehall and Jamaican society. By employing sexually explicit lyrics and performances, Yellowman was able to validate his masculinity and flip the stereotype of the adolescent impotent albino.

Douglas has shown how white European culture's constructed sexual stereotypes of blacks has amounted to an assault on black culture (Douglas 1999). Black culture has learned to mock white "culture's guileful derision of Black sexuality," such as the supposed sexual prowess and endowments of black males (Ibid). Yellowman's use of these tropes in his own songs can be read as an attempt to use white culture's stereotypes of black sexuality to validate his own blackness and sexual legitimacy.

The trope of the sexually desirable albino in Yellowman's work, then, should be seen as a device to gain prestige and overcome social estrangement. The fact that it involved transgressing mainstream society's prescribed moral order—the rules and expectations about what is considered right/good that ideally uphold the social system—should not be taken lightly (Sobo 1993). Following Austin-Brooks, who considers the ethic of eudemonism, or expressive joy and healing found in Jamaica, to be inherited from

African ontology, and links eudemonism to the magical rite of the trick (Austin-Broos 1997), Yellowman employed slackness as his trick against society, but one that had a healing effect for him because it smoothed over society's tendency to treat him as anathema. Like Anansi in Jamaican and West African folk traditions, Yellowman is a trickster, he uproots social values and ingrained traditions and creates a new social paradigm. Jamaica's colonial past provided its citizens with an amalgamated value system of Euro-American and African origin, but it was the former that was considered proper and respectable, while it was the latter that Yellowman drew on when he celebrated the body, procreation and the physical realm. Like Yellowman, Anansi opposes European ethical rationalism, the idea that "marriage, work and a sober life are integral to a Christian being", instead Anansi embraces play, pleasure and eudemonism (Chevannes 2006, 136)

Yellowman's ideology of race is nothing if not complex. He switches from celebrating his yellowness as an aphrodisiac to privileging his blackness (or both at the same time), but then, in other songs, downplays either colour as the secret to his sexual charms. In "Mad Over Me" he insists that while many women leave their boyfriends to fall in love with him, it is his self-respect rather than his colour, that they are drawn to

Dem left dem man and come to Yellowman  
 Not because me complexion but it true me have ambition  
 —Yellowman, "Mad Over Me"

In several songs Yellowman uses the term "ambition," not in the standard English sense of aspiration but in the Jamaican meaning of "self-respect" (Cassidy 2002, 9). This pride of self is his greatest weapon against detractors and can be seen as a powerful act of

resistance against a society that spent considerable effort to nullify his self-respect. If we look at the meaning of the above songs in conjunction with one another we understand that Yellowman's body is desirable because it is yellow but that racialization is not the only way to account for his sex appeal. Later in "Mad Over Me" Yellowman confronts the fact that society considers him ugly but, by his own admission, girls are still flocking to him. The very premise of the song is the basis for his entire routine—a humorous narrative of his sexual desirability to the opposite sex. The audience, however, is never quite sure whether this routine is delivered tongue in check or authentically serious.<sup>135</sup>

Dem see me pon the road, dem laugh after me  
 Some of dem a talk about me too ugly  
 Some of dem a talk about me too *boasy*  
 A man like me shoulda inna cemetery  
 The next one a talk 'bout me too *facey*  
 They start ask why the girls dem a rush me  
 I sexy me sexy<sup>136</sup>

—Yellowman, "Mad Over Me"

We can surmise that this is probably based on actual insults Yellowman would hear on the streets of Kingston. The verse tells us where the albino's place in society should be located. At best a dundus should be ridiculed, humbled, subordinate and avoid any hint of impudence. At worst he/she should be killed, a fate suggested by the use of the term "cemetery" and "duppy" in the original 1981 recording. Instead of responding to these

<sup>135</sup> To further complicate matters, Yellowman appears to always be in on the joke that he, as an albino, could be sexy. In "Yellowman Wise" he states that he has girlfriends in Kingston, Negril, Portland and London and that "when me done chat they goin' give me romance / But this is something me haffi laugh with everyone."

<sup>136</sup> This is taken from the 1984 version of the song. The 1981 version uses the term "favour duppy" instead of "too ugly." Duppy is patois for ghost (Cassidy 2002, 164) and is an insulting term since it connotes death, while "favour" means to resemble (Ibid., 174). *Boasy* and *facey* mean "boastful" and "impertinent" respectively (Ibid., 57, 172). Yellowman could also be using the patois term *fasi* here which refers to sores or abrasions on the skin (Ibid., 173).

insults with anger, Yellowman's trademark is to laugh at his tormentors by answering the question "why do the girls love me?" with the self-explanatory answer because I am sexy We could take this to mean that he is sexy because of his albinism or, as in the stanza above, because of his ambition

There is another layer to why Yellowman sometimes downplays his albinism as the secret to his success with the opposite sex Even though he was discriminated against based on his colour when he first tried to enter the music industry, after he started to gain fame some people suggested that his was successful because he looked different—it was the spectacle of the albino on the microphone that caused crowds to attend his shows, much like the people who flocked to see Sarah Baartman over a century ago Other deejays, Yellowman remembers, jealous of his success, would chide him "the deejays used to say it's because of me colour that's why me get famous" Thus by pointing out that he would be desirable with or without yellow skin, Yellowman is inadvertently telling his critics that his fame is not solely based on the spectacle of different skin colour

### ***Chapter Summary***

Yellowman was born into a society that had inherited both African and European prejudices against black albinos His abandonment by his parents has to be understood within this context Even if there were financial reasons that ultimately led his parents to leave him in a garbage bag, the society they lived in already predisposed them to thinking that a dundus child was abnormal Yellowman's colour was singled out by school bullies

and later studio thugs as the reason to exclude him and treat him as a marginal member of society. Centuries old ideologies of freakishness, weakness and even sexual impotence or deviance informed the decisions made by the people who marginalized him. Growing up it would have been a normal everyday occurrence for Winston Foster to walk down a street and hear people he did not know shout things to him such as “dundus” or “yellow man,” not to politely offer a salutation but to underscore his object status, reinscribe society’s classification schema and point out his anomalous status within that tightly guarded system (Carnegie 1996). In order to succeed Yellowman needed to find a way to somehow undermine this powerful cultural stereotype. One of his greatest achievements is that he was able to embrace his albino body and ultimately wrestle his representation out of the hands of society and redefine what he, and other albinos, are capable of.<sup>137</sup>

By choosing to use society’s exclusionary linguistic term “yellow man” as his professional nomenclature, Yellowman accomplished what hip-hop culture would later do by reclaiming the word “nigger” as an empowering epithet, snatching it away from John Crow’s derisive usage. Like nigger, the use of Yellowman contested culturally embedded views of the albino as subordinate and other and reversed its meaning by revalorizing it in a positive light. Yellowman undermines Jamaica’s instantiated moral order through his slack mouth and his stubborn insistence that an albino has as much right to public space (and celebrity status) as any other member of society. By embracing the pejorative term and twisting its meaning Yellowman throws the slur back at his oppressors and puts him in control of how the term is understood by society. By attaching beauty and sexual

---

<sup>137</sup> This is not to say that albinos do not still suffer discrimination in Jamaica. See Carnegie (1996, 482) for details of his experiences there in 1993.

desirability to the term, Yellowman's self-aggrandizing project was outrageous and daring but wildly successful

## CHAPTER 2

### Slacker Than Them: The King of Slack and Social Critique

Dem gwaan like they slack but me slacker then dem  
Yellowman with the slackness again

—Yellowman, “Cocky did a Hurt Me”

The decline of radical reggae can be illustrated by reference to the career of  
Winston ‘Yellowman’ Foster, the most popular toaster of the early eighties

—Paul Gilroy 1987, 188-189

#### *Introduction*

This chapter is a review of the literature concerning Yellowman’s representation in the media and scholarly research, with particular focus on how he was fashioned contrary to Bob Marley and how, following from this, dancehall reggae has been constructed in opposition to roots reggae. Yellowman suffered racial prejudice at home but critics abroad adjudicated him via different criteria, instead making evaluative judgments concerning slackness, musical worth and the digital technologies used to create dancehall. I argue here that the stigmatizing of dancehall as the nadir of Jamaican music history is based on Eurocentric values and Euro-American definitions of musical aesthetics. In short, critics were unable to accept that slack music and social critique were not mutually exclusive, and they surmised that since dancehall lacked melody, harmony and was often recorded and performed digitally, it was an inferior form of music. I contest this assertion and use Yellowman as a case study to argue that slackness does not always negate social critique. I suggest that Yellowman’s slackness is an example of Obika Gray’s (2004) thesis that in Jamaica the poor black underclasses in the late

seventies contested the moral sway of the elites who sought to maintain power through moral regulation

I draw here on Stanley-Niaah's (2006) work on historicizing slackness. She argues that dancehall has been unfairly given the status of the progenitor of slackness. Reggae histories, she tells us, spin a compelling tale that insist factors such as the death of Bob Marley in 1981, the change of government from the socialist party of Michael Manley to the right wing conservatism of Edward Seaga's JLP, and the surge of narcotics and guns onto the island propelled "an exaggerated, ostentatious selfhood" that manifested itself in a new form of music (Ibid, 179). This new music, dancehall, focused on slack topics such as sex and violence. Take, for example, Gilroy's version of reggae history that sees the Marley era as socially engaged, Rasta-centric and revolutionary next to dancehall's flippancy.

The largely Rasta-inspired singers, songwriters and dub poets who had guided the music to its place as a vibrant populist force for change in the society were brushed aside and their place was taken by a legion of DJs or toasters. Under Seaga, the singers' and songwriters' influence faded and they retreated from the revolution which their Rasta language had demanded. The DJs took centre stage (Gilroy 1987, 188).

Stanley-Niaah argues that such a theory is reductionist because there is little clear evidence to support it. The rise of slackness in post-eighties dancehall was not an anomaly, she reminds us that Caribbean culture has a long history of slackness. Songs about sex and women's bodies were popular in mento, calypso and ska long before dancehall started to raise concerns among social conservative critics in the late seventies and early eighties.

### ***The Nadir of Jamaican Popular Music***

There is an ongoing trend among cultural critics (Boyne 2008, Burton 1997, Chevannes 1999, Gilroy 1987) to conceive of dancehall reggae as a de-evolution from roots reggae, with Bob Marley's 1981 death instigating this transition. Commentators both inside and outside the reggae community have propagated a thesis that the move to dancehall in the eighties, with its focus on deejays, male braggadocio and digital instrumentation, represents the nadir of Jamaican music history. Music journalists have equated "reggae with Rasta, and dancehall with decline" (Stolzoff 2000, xxi)

Reggae critics, especially foreign-based ones, were nearly unanimous in their condemnation of the dancehall style, because the most popular songs of the new style were not inspired by the "Rasta consciousness" that so many American and European counterculturalists had come to love and admire (Stolzoff 2000, 100)

This degeneration is based on two criteria, aesthetics—dancehall is understood as a less complex music form than its predecessors—and morality. Reggae histories that promote the de-evolution thesis position Yellowman as the linchpin between the cultural reign of Rastafari in the seventies and the spiritual vacuum of eighties dancehall, and credit slackness with a triumph over political and religious consciousness. Yet Yellowman's representation in the media as the King of Slack ignores not only his blatant cultural songs, but also offers a two-dimensional understanding of slackness as necessarily devoid of political and social critique and incompatible with spiritual matters. Yellowman's slackness was always motivated by his eagerness to please an audience, to be sure, but a comprehensive analysis of his slackness, sexual ethics, racial politics and religious beliefs reveals that entertainment concerns and poignant social critiques were not mutually

exclusive in Yellowman's career

Bob Marley famously called his brand of roots reggae rebel music, a categorization that has stuck and is liberally applied to all roots-era reggae. But when looking at how roots reggae and dancehall have been constructed in the popular imagination, perhaps it is dancehall that truly deserves the moniker "rebel." Unlike its elder sibling, dancehall has not enjoyed critical acclaim outside of Jamaica in most of the mainstream press. Music reviewers still fall head over heels for Marley reissues and new material from bona fide roots artists such as Burning Spear or Israel Vibration, but dancehall is portrayed as aesthetically disappointing and morally void. Ironically, these roots groups enjoy scant popularity in their home country, yet foreign journalists "lavish ecstatic reviews" on them (Chang and Chen 1998, 61). In fact, recent controversies surrounding homophobic lyrics in the works of Elephant Man, Sizzla, Capleton and others have portrayed the entire genre of dancehall as an essentially violent and morally corrupt enterprise and has furthered its representation as inimical to roots reggae. On March 4, 2009 a New York group of reggae fans known as the Coalition to Preserve Reggae Music (CPR) hosted a community forum and panel discussion titled "Could Dancehall be the ruination of Reggae and by extension, the Jamaica brand?" The discussion stemmed from recent concern over dancehall music, including the Broadcasting Commission of Jamaica's decision to ban slack song on public airwaves and public transportation, and international pressure to boycott concerts by dancehall artists Buju Banton, Beenie Man, T O K , Capleton, Sizzla and Elephant Man because of their violent and homophobic lyrics. A co-founder of CPR, Sharon Gordon, said in a press release for the event "Instead of music portraying truths, rights, love and respect,

we see a popular sound that is demeaning, hateful, destructive and downright vulgar” (TSO Productions, 2009)

The segregating of roots reggae and dancehall into exclusive categories sets up an imaginary binary opposition that is not shared by many of the younger fans of dancehall (Cooper 2004, 81-82) Growing up in Bermuda it was normal to hear roots reggae next to dancehall at dances, parties, public functions, concerts, bars, and emanating from the ubiquitous ghetto blasters perched on the shoulders of idle youth We did not distinguish one from the other in the eighties, yet reggae historians have made a clean division that fails “to recognize the continuities across seemingly fixed generic boundaries, routinely emphasizing, instead, absolute differences of tone, tempo and temper” (Ibid , 81)

Yellowman has always been at the centre of the characterization that sets roots reggae against dancehall, since it was Yellowman, more than any other artist, that heralded the start of the dancehall era for the international audience Online reggae compendium *Reggaepedia.com*, for instance, has this to say about Yellowman “Yellowman embodied the shift from Roots music to Dancehall more than anyone else during the early dancehall era his method of toasting was highly popular and he also epitomized dancehall’s penchant for ‘slack’ lyrics” (Ghoston 2009)

Dancehall has fallen victim to Eurocentric moralities on the part of journalists and scholars who refuse to accept that slackness can be employed to bring about social change By examining how Yellowman has been viewed in the literature, scholarly and journalistic alike, I will show how this reading has been two dimensional and has not attempted to understand him in the context of race, sexual politics and religion, or taken into account how his target audience understands his material

### ***The Moral Argument***

Cooper has located what she calls a “border clash” when the values of Jamaica and dancehall are critiqued from cultural spaces abroad (Cooper 2004, 25) It is this clashing of moralities that is at the heart of a moral depravity argument, which, in a nutshell, is that the values of dancehall are not conducive to civilized society This is seen in the music’s preoccupation with guns and violence, suggestive dance routines and slack lyrics Dancehall is hedonistic, self-centred and destructive for society, so the argument goes Boxill (1994) sees a double standard inherent in this reading The middle class is against dancehall’s open sexuality yet they excuse the erotic gyrating called whining that accompanies calypso as examples of public sexuality sanctioned by the mainstream Why then is erotic dancing stigmatized when it occurs in dancehall? “The higher classes determine what is acceptable and what is not,” says Boxill (Boxill in Stolzoff 2000, 244) The same can be said for erotic lyrics When a deejay sings about sex in dancehall it is called slackness, when a calypsonian or mento artist sings about sex, it is considered bawdy

Nowhere is the morally reprehensible argument more apparent than in discussions of Yellowman, who has been treated as slackness’s scapegoat Critics have singled him out as the artist responsible for ending the era of socially conscious and musically superior roots reggae and initializing a new epoch of populist repetitive dance music whose substance celebrates nothing deeper than carnal pleasures Yellowman “rubbed many who loved reggae for its uplifting social and spiritual message the wrong way,” wrote one journalist in 1986 (Snowden) In this chapter I will return again and again to critics who put forward the moral argument for the de-evolution of reggae, finding

slackness incompatible with social critique I balance this critique with several examples of how Yellowman's slackness has been politically and socially motivated by employing Gray's (2004) theory that slackness increased the social power of the urban poor

### ***Society Party***

They send a limousine with 10 police  
 To escort Yellowman up to Inter Conti  
 Me come out a the car police elude me  
 Seaga and Manley, they come meet me  
 We seat around the table, Johnny Walker Whiskey  
 Me start chat me culture, roots and reality  
 Seaga get up with his wife Mitsy  
 And start with the style named Water Pumpee<sup>138</sup>  
 —Yellowman, "Society Party"

One of Yellowman's most prestigious critics is former Prime Minister (1980-89) Edward Seaga Seaga is no stranger to the Jamaica's cultural industries A Harvard graduate with a degree in social anthropology, Seaga was on the ground floor of Jamaica's indigenous music industry in the fifties and sixties, first as a producer and record label owner, and later as a politician He helped bring mento and ska greater national and international acclaim and as Minister of Development and Welfare in the sixties he aided in the promotion of ska overseas He established the Jamaica Festival for literary, performing, plastic and graphics arts, introduced National Heritage Week and created the Cultural Training Centre for all the Arts He also started *Jamaica Journal*, a quarterly publication dedicated to promoting the arts alongside the social sciences (Jamaica Labour Party 2009) Seaga was in power when Yellowman ascended to the deejay throne and became

---

<sup>138</sup> Inter Conti refers to the Intercontinental Hotel Water Pumpee is the name of a dance

one of Jamaica's hottest exports Seaga then, has cultural credentials He has a long view of the Jamaican music industry and his opinion is well informed Yet even Seaga has accepted at face value the de-evolution thesis Now a columnist with the *Gleaner*, he recently penned this

Bob Marley's 'conscious' lyrics overlaid the ideological ferment with a musical, not militaristic, campaign against oppression After Marley died in 1981 and ideological campaigns became futile because of the new political perspectives of a change of government, the earlier permissiveness did not fade It hardened in a new direction Sexual explicitness was an area of wide-open social expression in the culture of folk society, particularly the inner city, but not publicly promoted It was Yellow Man (Winston Blake) who stepped beyond the threshold of sexual permissiveness in music 'Slackness' music was born According to Yellow Man, "is slackness de people want and is slackness I ah give dem" What was thought to be a passing phase became more entrenched and more explicit, growing in the spirit of permissiveness until in the nineties when the sexual content knew few bounds Yellow Man popularised the deejay format in his songs (Seaga 2008)<sup>139</sup>

Here Seaga aligns Marley with consciousness, ideological resistance and musical campaigns against oppression, and dancehall with permissiveness, boundary-breaking sexual explicitness and militarism This is somewhat ironic given that critics such as Gilroy have pointed to Seaga's regime and the "consequent militarization of ghetto life" as integral to the shift toward dancehall (Gilroy 1987, 188, Walker 2005) Seaga typically marks the era change with Marley's death, and names Yellowman as the deejay that ushered in the new era He does historicize sexual permissiveness, saying that it was a "wide-open social expression in the culture of folk society" but blames Yellowman for not only bringing it into the public sphere, but creating slackness music Seaga is wrong on at least two accounts here Slackness music was born long before Yellowman, and Marley's campaigns against oppression can hardly be neutralized as non-militaristic

---

<sup>139</sup> Seaga gets Yellowman's birth name wrong here It is Winston Foster

Drummie Zeb, drummer for British roots group ASWAD, has said that Marley “had subtly taken militant reggae into the mainstream” (Bradley 2001, 490) Elsewhere I have argued that Marley’s music can be read as advocating armed struggle to attain world peace, advocating revolution in the African context specifically and all colonial contexts generally and prophesying an apocalyptic war between good and evil I suggest that for Bob Marley peace was the ultimate goal but that he did not rule out violence as a viable means to that end (Hagerman 2007a)

The song excerpt above from “Society Party” shows Yellowman contesting the moral argument head on in a typically humorous fashion He can chat cultural lyrics for high society, the song tells us, so he must be morally upstanding In the song the heads of state were meeting with American president Ronald Regan and wanted appropriate entertainment Being unsatisfied with the other top deejays of the day (because “Peter Metro chant too much Spanish,” “Josey Wales chat too much badness” and Sassafras “come from the ass family”), they decide on Yellowman because “when Yellowman chat, nothing slack ” Likewise, in “Strong Me Strong” Yellowman tells us that when the Queen visits Jamaica, his is the first hand she shakes “That fe show you say me well important,” he chats, enjoying the chance to rewrite his own history and representation as a member of high society For Yellowman, the fact that he can also chat slackness when it is needed, does not negate his moral or cultural credentials

### ***The Aesthetic Argument***

Seaga has also espoused an aesthetic argument against dancehall Telling

Jamaican reporters that his love for Jamaican music does not include dancehall he offered these reasons why “Dancehall music lacks components of classical music, which includes lyrics, melody and rhythms,” and “it doesn’t have melody, and forget lyrics, but what it does have is rhythm and that has made it hugely popular” Seaga hopes that “somebody comes up with a tune once again” (Henry 2009) To be fair, Seaga’s recent comments were in response to the “Gully vs Gaza” conflict that started as a lyrical war between deejays Mavado and Vybz Kartel but has spilled out on the streets of Kingston with violent acts being committed by warring factions from garrison communities known as either the Gully or Gaza But Seaga’s comments are indicative of the aesthetic arguments made against dancehall that construct it as musically inferior to western music—this is apparent in Seaga’s use of classical music as a foil to measure dancehall against Dancehall, we learn, is all about rhythm and lacks the necessary components of classical music

The stigmatizing of dancehall as aesthetically inferior to roots reggae is due to clear-cut oppositions in music technology and performance in the late seventies and early eighties in the music industry singer/deejay, analogue /digital, session musicians/computer riddims, international reggae culture/local soundsystem culture Manual locates a major technological change in dancehall as the generative moment when critics sounded the death knell on reggae

The dancehall music of the late eighties and early nineties was seen by many reggae fans as a creative low point for Jamaican popular music—a slump from which many feel it has yet to recover (Manual 1995, 173)

This started in the mid-eighties when the digital revolution sparked by producers like

King Jammy and Black Scorpio—who used computers to build riddims instead of studio musicians—changed how reggae was written, recorded and manufactured almost overnight. Rhythms played using only Casio keyboards took the place of bass and drums in many songs, such as Wayne Smith’s “Sleng Teng,” the digital song that many finger as ushering in the massive sea change. Writing in 1988, O’Gorman says that dancehall was regarded by some “as a sinister threat to mainstream reggae,” and was thought of as a passing fad, “some people,” she wrote, “question whether it constitutes music at all” (O’Gorman 1988, 51). The new fad put many older roots musicians out of work, singer Dennis Brown was famously quoted in *The Gleaner* as saying dancehall “won’t last forever” (McGowan 1987). Others, such as session musicians and producers Sly and Robbie, thrived as they were quick to adapt to the new paradigm with Sly being the first Jamaican drummer to use an electronic drum kit in the late seventies. The new style of music, variously called dancehall, deejay, ragga or ragamuffin, became the dominant musical expression of youth in Jamaica from the early eighties until today and seemed, for critics, to eclipse the Rasta consciousness of reggae produced in the seventies.

Perhaps British reggae bassist and dub producer Dennis Bovell summed up this position best when he said, “when computers came in, that’s when the amateurs took over” (Bradley 2001, 501). The rise of dancehall reggae was complimented by synthesizers and computer technology in the studio. Dancehall not only embraced the digital age, it was the bellwether for music industries worldwide when musicians, producers and music journalists were still debating whether analogue or digital technology was better. In the mid-nineties, reggae had already enjoyed a decade of digital supremacy.

The dancehall era has been maligned for its lack of talent and focus on craft. Bovell calls it reggae's "karaoke phase" (Ibid). The focus in dancehall switched from singers and vocal groups—the connotation here is that singers possessed talent, learned a craft, and were rehearsed—to talk-over artists or deejays who are improvisational and do not need, so the argument goes, musical skills such as pitch, tone, technique, melody and harmony. Whereas roots reggae was centred on singers and vocal trios with layers of melody and harmony, dancehall reduces the genre to rhythm—drum and bass. Gone are the horn sections, backup singers, guitar licks and organ counter melodies and in their place are the mostly male deejay voices. It must be noted, however, that many who criticize dancehall for this very aspect group dub reggae alongside roots reggae. Dub, as explained in the introduction to this dissertation, paved the way for the dominance of rhythm over melody, open spaces over full band arrangements and bass lines over singers that dancehall would adopt.

The aesthetic argument is plainly based on the idea that European or American based music is normal and superior. Foreign critics attributed the popularity of dancehall to bad taste and a diminished capacity for originality and creativity on the part of its creators when compared against reggae of the sixties and seventies (Stolzoff 2000, 100). The music that Bob Marley and the Wailers marketed to the west in the seventies was far from indigenous Jamaican reggae, yet is clearly what critics measure dancehall against most often. Marley's first album for Island Records, *Catch a Fire*, was purposely altered to appeal to a white audience familiar with rock music. American and British rock musicians overdubbed blues and rock guitar and keyboard riffs and the tracks were remixed to diminish the role of the bass and highlight the role of the guitar. As well,

reggae was a 45s market—albums in Jamaica were normally collections of songs originally released as singles. *Catch a Fire* was the first time a reggae band recorded a full album with the intent of releasing it as a stand-alone LP. A simple comparison between the original recordings the Wailers did at Harry J's in Jamaica and the subsequent Island release conspicuously shows how the Wailers began moving away from a local sound toward a global sound, understandably in order to catch the ears of the global marketplace.<sup>140</sup> As Marley wrote increasingly for his global audience he used songwriting techniques rarely employed in reggae. His chord progressions, use of bridges, length of songs and liberal use of guitar solos all share more similarities with black American blues, soul and R & B, and white American and British rock and folk songwriting traditions than mento, ska or reggae. Dub poet Linton Kwesi Johnson called this new style of reggae “international reggae”

It incorporates international elements from popular music: rock and soul, blues and funk. Instead of concentrating exclusively on a bottom-heavy sound with emphasis on drum and bass, you had on [*Catch a Fire*] more of a ‘tippy’ mix, a lighter sound. The emphasis is more on guitar and other fillers. (Davis 1994, 96)

*Catch a Fire* was a flop in Jamaica where the American and British aesthetics of the record went unappreciated. However, it is this pseudo-Jamaican reggae that foreign critics fell in love with and that has since become institutionalized as authentic reggae in the foreign press. It is this faux authentic product that dancehall—a fully local sound—has subsequently been measured against.

With this in mind, roots reggae produced in Jamaica during the seventies is not

---

<sup>140</sup> The 2001 re-release of *Catch a Fire, Deluxe Edition* (Island Records) includes the original Jamaican versions.

that far removed aesthetically from dancehall produced in the early eighties. The tradition of versioning had been in effect in Jamaican music at least since the sixties. Rupie Edwards was the first producer to use the term “version” to describe the b-side of a 45 in 1969 (Hurford 2004) but the practice of using a previous rhythm goes back to mento. Several different song lyrics would be composed on one mento tune (Senior 2003, 315). In the early dancehall era Yellowman was deejaying over top of the same riddims that cultural singers Johnny Osborne (“Truths and Rights”), the Heptones (“Party Time”) and the Mighty Diamonds (“Pass the Kutchie” / “Full Up”) sang over. Channel One, the studio Yellowman was aligned with in 1981-1982, made its name by rerecording and updating the foundational riddims recorded at Studio One during the sixties and seventies. Channel One led the charge toward deejay artists and dancehall music starting in the mid-seventies. Admittedly, the new versions downplayed melody instruments in favour of dominant bass and drums but the riddims of early dancehall were the same as those played on roots songs. Roots artists employed the same method of recording—they also sang their original songs over top of pre-recorded riddims. These riddims, especially in the case of Studio One, were either part of a producer’s existing library of riddims or, as in the case of Channel One, were updated by a studio band hired by the producer. Yet this fact was lost on many people who wrote about reggae outside Jamaica. Writing about Yellowman in 1996 for an American newspaper, Green tried to draw a line between dancehall and roots reggae by way of recording technology. “This practice of rapping, or ‘toasting,’ over the other musical beds made by previous acts contrasted sharply with the roots style of reggae that was prominent in the late seventies” (Green 1996). Green is evidently thinking of Wailers-style roots reggae, because very few bands apart from the

Wailers were stand-alone units that wrote and recorded their own material. Even other major roots acts in the seventies like Burning Spear, the Itals and Culture sang over pre-existing riddims. This is because since the ska days, Jamaican music has always been a collaboration between a series of studio bands and performing artists. The studio bands wrote and recorded the riddims, the performing artists then wrote vocal parts that complimented the existing recordings.

Even once dancehall shifted toward new digital riddims, producers continued the tradition of versioning older foundational riddims. For instance, George Phang produced Half Pint's massive ragga hit "Greetings", the song was voiced over Sly and Robbie's heavily electronic update of early Studio One riddim "Heavenless." Riddims with names such as "Ali Baba," "Boops," "Cuss Cuss," "Death in the Arena," "Full Up," "General," "Johnny Dollar," "M16," "Stalag 17," "My Conversation," "Stars," "Bobby Babylon," "Pressure and Slide," "Queen Majesty," "Real Rock," "Revolution," "Satta Massagana," "Shank I Sheck," "Swing Easy," "Vanity" and "Westbound Train" all started life as roots reggae songs and were versioned repeatedly well into the dancehall era. Yellowman himself has recorded on most of these riddims.<sup>141</sup>

The fact that versioning continued into dancehall and was propagated by dancehall is a testament to how Jamaican music—whether ska, reggae or dancehall—never strays far from its roots. Contrary to the de-evolution thesis that posits dancehall in contradistinction to its antecedents, dancehall remembers its roots and constantly revisits and updates them in the form of riddims and lyrical themes. Yes, dancehall privileged chatting over singing and rhythm over melody, but the dancehall and deejaying of

---

<sup>141</sup> For a good database of riddims, check either [www.jamrid.com](http://www.jamrid.com) or [www.riddimguide.com](http://www.riddimguide.com)

Yellowman and Shabba Ranks in the eighties, Super Cat and Buju Banton in the nineties and Sizzla and Sean Paul in the noughts, has become progressively more complex than the seventies rub-a-dub of U-Roy, Big Youth, Trinity, Michigan and Smiley, Lone Ranger and General Echo. Not only have the musicians and producers embarked on a relentless hunt for new sounds and rhythmic textures, the production values of Super Cat's *The Struggle Continues* or the scope of social commentary and musical diversity on Buju Banton's *'Til Shiloh* has no parallel with what music critics argue is authentic reggae from the seventies.

Sly and Robbie were foundational in enhancing the role that the bass and drums played in reggae during the early dancehall period. While at Channel One they recorded new versions of Studio One classic riddims but gave prominence to the bass and drums over the melody instruments. Horn, organ and guitar melodies would often be absent from the new versions with the bass line and heavy drums taking centre-stage. One of the main aesthetic changes between roots and dancehall was the move away from the sparse "one drop" rhythm of the drums to a heavier rock feel. One drop reggae brought the kick and snare down on the third beat of the bar and left the downbeat—the one—silent. It essentially "dropped" the "one." Almost all of Marley's Island material up until the *Exodus* (1977) album uses variations on the one drop.<sup>142</sup> Beginning in the mid-seventies drummers such as Sly Dunbar experimented with changing this. While on tour with Peter Tosh in the United States, Sly played at festivals with rock bands. Here he became aware that rock drummers produced loud and powerful beats whereas roots reggae seemed

---

<sup>142</sup> In fact, when Marley recorded "Punky Reggae Party" at Lee Perry's Black Ark Studio in 1976 or 1977, his drummer, Carlton Barrett, refused to veer from the one drop. Marley was forced to bring in Sly Dunbar because he wanted the modern steppers beat that Sly was known for at the time (Dunbar 2006).

quieter and weak in comparison. It was in response to this that Sly began playing more rock-oriented beats back in Jamaica as a session drummer with several studios, Channel One among them. One of these beats became known as *steppers*. *Steppers* is characterized by the kick drum beating out all four quarter notes in a measure. This drastically increased the power of the drums in reggae and was liberally adopted for dancehall. This is how critics of dancehall, such as Seaga, can accurately say that dancehall focuses on rhythm, not melody.

In this dissertation's introduction I demonstrated how, using Gilroy's (1993) theory that black expressive culture offers a counterculture or critique of modernity, reggae music critically engages with western musical traditions and purposely inverts them, drawing influence from non-western traditions in the process. While not seeking to repeat myself, I will point out that the aesthetic argument that dancehall has less musical value than roots reggae or western music should be balanced by a description of how dancehall aesthetics is rooted in non-western traditions. The fact that dancehall privileges rhythm over melody is an obvious example of African musical influence. There is a parallel here with Harris (1987) who has said that hip-hop is the most African of the black music genres because it eschews European music ideas such as melody in favour of pure African expressions of voice and rhythm. Reggae's emphasis of the afterbeat or offbeat is shared in Afro-American musical traditions such as early New Orleans R & B, and inverts the western custom of centering a musical measure around a strong downbeat. And as I've pointed out earlier, dancehall, like dub reggae and roots reggae, does not follow western songwriting conventions. The aesthetic qualities of dancehall are indeed very different from conventional western popular music, but that is no reason to denigrate

dancehall

### ***Earlier Nadirs of Jamaican Popular Music***

Dancehall was controversial music from its beginning, its lyrics were routinely criticized by authorities for “promoting social disorder and leading the youth astray. Dancehall music was accused of encouraging slackness, the use of guns, glorifying ‘badmen’ and promoting drug-use” (Lesser 2008, 186). To put this in the context of music history in Jamaica, lewd songs, celebrations of gangsterism and odes to ganja were being sung long before dancehall. Mento, ska, rocksteady and reggae were also decried as ghetto music by elite society in their heyday and were regarded as the music of the lower class (Barrow and Coote 2004). The upper and middle classes listened to American big band swing music between the thirties and fifties and much of the urban population was not interested in mento during this period as it was regarded ambivalently as country music. Instead, they looked toward black America for the wildly popular R & B music that began to be played on Jamaica’s outdoor soundsystems (Chang and Chen 1998, 14-16). Even the early record producers like Stanley Motta and Ken Khouri—both uptown men that had money to open a business and whose modus operandi was to turn a profit—would have devalued the aesthetic worth of the mento music recorded in their studios as music of the lower class. These men were interested in the music as a material commodity, not a cultural commodity (Bradley 2001, 25).

Up until independence in 1962, folk culture in Jamaica, and anything considered African in origin, was disparaged. Europe was held up as the zenith of culture and

European culture dominated Jamaica's official national identity in terms of value system, art, education, laws and customs (Nettleford 1974, 302-303) With independence came a new "creole multiracial nationalist project" that saw prominence bestowed on the island's African heritage "those religious and secular rituals, speech patterns, foods, musical forms, and dances associated with the rural peasantry came to enjoy some measure of legitimacy by the state" (Thomas 2004, 5) As such mento and rural folk culture enjoyed a level of respectability to which it was previously denied

Ska, rocksteady and reggae, while idealized by critics today, fought their own battles in their respective days against a mainstream public that devalued their cultures Certainly any musician to adopt Rasta ideologies in their lyrics or wear Rasta symbols was chided as a "dutty," or dirty, Rasta In fact, even by the mid-late sixties Coxone Dodd's Studio One was the only studio where musicians were allowed to smoke ganja With more and more of the music fraternity "locksing up," Rastas still suffered prejudice in society Duke Reid, owner of Treasure Island studio, disliked Rastas and did not allow marijuana, lighting up at Federal Studios would get you run out the door, and Dynamic studios was owned by uptown entrepreneur and bandleader Byron Lee Dodd was sympathetic to Rastas and turned a blind eye to their indulgences Singer Horace Andy has posited that this is why Studio One established itself as the island's top studio for so long (Bradley 2001, 223)

### ***Two Giants Clash: Marley Versus Yellowman***

Although there were numerous other talented reggae musicians, none captured the hearts and minds of people around the world as Bob Marley did To many, Bob

Marley was and still *is* reggae (Haskins 2002, 91 Italics in original)

After Bob died, the biggest star in reggae was this salacious, foulmouthed, homophobic, misogynistic rapper called Yellowman, and it changed the whole tone of the music The music turned so foul, so debauched, I decided I didn't want to be around it anymore (Roger Steffens interviewed by Richard Burnett, 2006)<sup>143</sup>

Yellowman is often singlehandedly blamed for the slackness trend that arose in dancehall in the eighties and still continues today The flip side of this is that Yellowman is also seen as responsible for ending the cultural roots reggae era, the era that Bob Marley defined so well for so many, at least so many non-Jamaicans "Conventional wisdom in Jamaica, manifested in the popular press and on numerous talk-show programs, valorizes Bob Marley's politically charged reggae lyrics as the peak of 'culture'" (Cooper 2004, 73) Marley not only represents the epitome of cultural reggae, or even "good" reggae for many, he also has come to embody authentic reggae for many abroad His enormous cross-over appeal into white markets would have many people later argue that Marley and his reactionary brand of Rastafari came to represent reggae music for many people globally (Bradley 2001, 397)

The seismic shift in international reggae was, without a doubt, the death of Bob Marley in May 1981 This date marks the end of the roots era for commentators and the beginning of dancehall's reign The death of Bob Marley caused an international daze among reggae fans who equated the event as the death knell for reggae (Ibid , 507) As the daze lifted the focus for the industry was on finding the next Bob Marley in hopes

---

<sup>143</sup> This quote is not fully representative of Steffens' current point of view In August 2008 I sat in on an interview he conducted with Yellowman at the Midwest Reggae Festival in Nelson, Ohio The interview had none of the sentiment found in the above quote In addition, Steffens has been supportive and helpful with this research

that they could recreate his success and continue to market reggae into the eighties Bradley says that “virtually anyone with an engaging smile, a headful of dreadlocks and a one-drop way with a pop-tinged tune earned such a prefix” and cites Dennis Brown, Freddie McGregor, John Holt and Gregory Isaacs as hopefuls (Ibid , 507)

Many American journalists stopped paying attention to reggae when Marley died Indeed, many were not listening even when Marley was alive Legendary *Creem* writer Lester Bangs has said that reggae in the U S was “outright disdained by blacks” in the seventies (Bordowitz 2004, 48) As such it was white music journalists who were the ones representing reggae to other white fans and that was often due to the enormous energies Chris Blackwell spent on marketing Marley to that demographic Writing in 1976 Bangs, who claims that reggae was “still an acquired taste for the vast majority of U S listeners, white or black,” was flown to Kingston by Island Records “with a raft of other white journalists and photographers for a sort of Cook’s Tour of Jamaican Music and the somewhat obligatory interview with Bob Marley” (Ibid , 47-48) Bangs, and presumably other media personalities, were treated to a week in Jamaica at Island’s expense to get the word to American youth about Bob Marley

The marketing campaign was so successful, however, that it virtually crippled the reggae industry in the States after Marley died Reggae remained on the college campuses but was all but dormant in the mainstream One 1993 article in *Time* magazine claimed that reggae had been in a “slump that lasted for most of the ’80s” (Garcia and Thigpen 1993) The same article inaccurately cites dancehall’s beginnings as post Marley, as if Marley’s life was so integral to the music the gap he left needed to be filled with something completely new

After Marley died of a brain tumor in 1981 at 36, a new generation of Trenchtown youths began to forge a harder, denser style of reggae called dancehall. Reflecting the desperate times in Kingston's ghettos, dancehall lyrics were charged with angry diatribes glorifying guns, drugs and sex, and sung often in a fast, talky style called 'toasting' (Ibid.)

The mistaken assumption that Trenchtown represents every community in Kingston is indicative of how completely Marley-fied western journalists had become. They were unable to see Jamaican music without looking through the lens of Marley reggae and were blind to the fact that deejaying and dancehall music in Jamaica had gradually been evolving on the island for close to a decade.

Western journalists have all too often written hagiographic accounts of Marley, erasing any sexist, violent or incendiary elements that effectively sanitize him for history. Writing in London's *Sunday Times* over a decade after Marley died, Tom Willis portrayed a chastened Bob Marley whose music was centred on lilted love songs over against dancehall (also called ragga in the U.K.) which he generalizes as slack, violent, sexist and homophobic (Willis 1993). Willis's oversimplification of both Marley and dancehall is indicative of the way these genres have been portrayed in the media.

Willis's generalization engenders a series of clear-cut oppositions: hate ragga versus Bob Marley's love songs, 1980's violence versus 1970's peace (presumably), toasting versus singing, "lilted" versus "high speed", (English) love songs versus patois lyrics—the contrast with English is implied in Willis's pointed reference to "patois" lyrics, hateful "misogyny, homophobia, gangsterdom and guns" versus unqualified love, pure and simple (Cooper 2004, 74).

By 1982 Yellowman was the biggest reggae star in the world. He caused roadblocks in London and Toronto that summer and his popularity both at home and abroad was unparalleled by any reggae artist previous, with the possible exception of

Marley Yellowman could bring downtown Kingston to a standstill in those years simply by stepping out of his yellow BMW at Halfway Tree. Even Marley never achieved that sort of celebrity in his lifetime.

Histories that are careful to compare Yellowman's dancehall slackness to Marley-style roots reggae situate him as Marley's polar opposite, but they rarely contextualize him in earlier dancehall and rub a dub deejay culture, and the tradition of slack entertainment that has been part of Caribbean music since the slavery era. Salewicz, at least, recognized this scapegoating in his book, *Reggae Explosion*

Yellowman's alleged 'slack' style was not as one-dimensional as it appeared. In that way typical of Jamaican art, there was always a spiritual underplay, as his general 'rudeness' also contained much irony. Coming immediately after the death of Bob Marley, Yellowman's success appeared to mark a downward slide for Jamaican music, but time shows it was more complex than that. (Salewicz and Boot 2001, 102)

Typically of reggae histories, Salewicz is vague about what the characteristics of Yellowman's spiritual engagement might be and does not attempt to situate him in anything other than general gloss of "Jamaican art." While Salewicz alludes to the fact that Yellowman's story is not simply black and white, he never fills in the rest of the shades of the picture.

An earlier article by Salewicz betrays that he himself was one of those comparing Yellowman to Marley.

Bob Marley's death in May 1981 stunned the music and stunted its growth. Developments that did occur were tangential, as though no-one had the confidence to make a major move. The rise of the New Wave DJ and DJ double-acts has been the most significant advance of the past two years. Figures like Eek-a-Mouse, Brigadier Jerry, and women toasters like Sister Nancy helped move the music on, or at least prevented it from falling back. A toasting superstar like Yellowman was an adequate jokey distraction but hardly fulfilled reggae's need for a leader.

(Salewicz 1983/2004, 138)

Salewicz's almost hagiographic portrayal of Marley's impact on the local Jamaican music industry is overwrought—Bradley (2001) has convincingly shown that Marley's music at the time of his death was far removed from the "advances" in homegrown reggae. This paragraph is indicative of how foreign journalists have written the history of reggae based on their own tastes. The reggae being made in Jamaica was very different than the Wailers' international style and Marley's influence on the local artists at the time was far below what Salewicz's describes. The music industry was in no way stunted upon his death and it is a ridiculous notion that an entire genre needs a leader. The Jamaican music industry routinely released far more records per week than would seem possible for a population of that size. The loss of Marley had an impact on society—his state funeral caused the government to postpone a budget debate and virtually brought Kingston to a stand-still, but the music industry continued apace. It even received an unlikely boost in the form of numerous tributes to Marley.

Travel guides are an accurate barometer to gauge how outsiders that are interested in a country's culture represent it to fellow outsiders. As such, this summary of Yellowman's contribution to reggae is a typical example of the generic caricature you find in popular culture when speaking of Yellowman, and, as expected, uses Marley as an aesthetic and moral foil.

These days, you're far more likely to be assailed by a clamorous barrage of raw drum and bass and shouty patois lyrics than hear Bob Marley or Burning Spear booming out from Jamaican speaker boxes. Known as dancehall (because that's where it originated and where it is best enjoyed), or ragga (from ragamuffin, meaning a rough-and-ready ghetto dweller), this is the most popular musical form in contemporary Jamaica. The genre first surfaced around 1979 and was cemented

in 1981 when a flamboyant albino DJ named Yellowman exploded onto the scene with his massive hits like *Married in the Morning*, *Mr Chin* and *Nobody Move*. Yellowman's lyrical bawdiness and huge popularity signified the departure from roots reggae and cultural toasting (the original term used to describe the Jamaican talking-over-music that inspired US rappers) to the sexually explicit and often violent DJ-ism that took hold in the 1980s. Though none were rawer than Yellow, who added energetic stage performances and self-deprecating humour to the expletives, other DJs—fueled by a positive response from their Jamaican audience—emulated his lewd approach, and sexually explicit lyrics—or “slackness”—began to proliferate. Essentially, dancehall is a raw, rude, hard-core music designed to titillate and tease its Jamaican audience on home ground and beyond. Whether you like the lyrics or hate them, it's unlikely you'll be able to resist dancehall's compelling rhythm and infectious hype, and while you're in Jamaica, it's futile to try (Thomas and Vaitlingam 2007, 446).

The writers of this travel guide make valuative judgments on dancehall by using terms like “clamorous,” “barrage,” “raw” and “shouty” to describe the genre. Their language connotes cacophony or noise, an attack of bracing, primitive or underdeveloped music that is always loud, amateur and not polished. In its obviously privileging of the Marley/Spear era of reggae the book represents an ageist and western view of dancehall. It even assumes that dancehall is only consumed by Jamaicans “on home ground or abroad,” therefore is not a music the tourist will be interested in once their Jamaican vacation, and their Eurocentric gaze, is over. Is it odd for a guidebook that is supposed to represent the present society and culture of Jamaica to romanticize and be nostalgic about the past, privileging roots reggae over dancehall? Not really. Guidebooks, even ones for travellers not interested in cookie cutter all inclusive holidays at beach resorts,<sup>144</sup> are designed with tourism in mind and tourism is inherently orientalist because it seeks to consume a foreign culture through a series of preset touristic experiences in a small amount of time. The orientalist goal of the tourist is to get to know the “real” Jamaica

---

<sup>144</sup> I'm thinking here of *Rough Guide* and *Lonely Planet*.

through a clutch of stereotypes. The guidebook's claim is that it can reveal the true culture of another country, yet it does so by sampling a relatively small set of activities geared toward western tastes in the exotic (hotel stays, beaches, festivals, nightclubs, restaurants, sporting activities), and is therefore not based on how the locals view their own culture.

Besides the book's dim view of the genre, it refers to Yellowman as the rawest of all deejays and uses him as the divide between roots reggae and dancehall. It is telling that the piece uses the word flamboyant, which appears to relate to his "energetic stage performances," but if the writers had actually looked at footage of Yellowman in the years they mention they would realize that he was neither flamboyant nor overly energetic—these attributes were added to his stage show in the nineties. Instead, the flamboyancy seems to refer to the fact that he has yellow skin. In the end the article does spend some positive adjectives on dancehall ("infectious," "compelling") but makes the comment that while you are in Jamaica you should not try to resist it. I might be reading too much into this, but there is latent sycophancy here—there is no need to enjoy dancehall at home, keep the exotic music at the exotic locale. The subtle racism and classism of the article typifies the moral superiority of the western guidebook: our music is normal, theirs is exotic.

Jamaica's tourism industry itself was slow to catch on to reggae—while reggae dominated local culture in the seventies, hotels and coastal resorts still hired calypso and mento bands to entertain foreigners in an attempt to recreate the quaint and idealized island paradise planted in their imaginations by travel agents. When the industry did discover reggae it was largely the Marley variety: Marley's "One Love" and "Smile

Jamaica” have both been used on ad campaigns for the island, along with the image of the bathing suit clad happy dreadlocked Rasta waiting to serve you drinks or perhaps something more taboo Dancehall, however, is not used to sell the island For foreign media and the local tourism industry dancehall represented “an assault on the image of the placid, harmonious, smiling tropical paradise that Jamaica wished to project” (Lesser 2008, 186)

Other media outlets have produced similar judgments on dancehall and equally inaccurate articles on Yellowman *The Miami Times* said that “when Bob Marley died in 1981, a seismic shift in reggae was set into motion the man credited as the pioneer called himself Yellowman” (Coomey 2006) The article inaccurately places Yellowman as a founding father of the deejay style—which has roots as far back as the fifties—and curiously says that “Yellowman became more well-known for his aggressive lifestyle than his penchant for a smooth and utterly revolutionary delivery” I am not sure what the writer means by “aggressive lifestyle” but usually in music journalism that refers to sex, drugs and violence What Coomey has probably done is confused Yellowman’s lyrics about sexual exploits with his real life and perhaps considers that an “aggressive lifestyle” In fact, Yellowman abstains from all alcohol and drugs, including marijuana, and has been quoted as far back as 1984 as saying that he does not smoke or drink (Singer 1984) As I discussed in Section II, there was a period in his later teens when Yellowman carried a gun, but when he started performing in the dancehall, he left that lifestyle behind He has, in fact, penned several eloquent songs against violence In “Tourist Season” he and Fathead are concerned that the level of violence on the island will affect tourism and the ability for everyone to have fun Yellowman furthers the theme

in “Stand up for your Rights” where he pleads with gunmen to make peace. A better pastime, he says is to “nice up” Jamaica and find a lover:

I beg you throw down your knife and throw down your gun  
 Cause this is our island in the sun  
 Just get one girl and go have some fun  
 Just get one girl and go have some fun  
 A me a go nice up Jamdung  
 —Yellowman, “Stand up for your Rights”

But “Gunman” is Yellowman’s most direct impeachment of gun violence to date. Not only does he reprimand the perpetrators of the violence, he also implicates foreign meddling in the distribution of weaponry—an obvious reference to popular rumours that the CIA provided artillery to the island’s gangs to destabilize Manley’s party—and presents the social costs of gun violence.

Gunman, say tell me whey you get yuh gun from  
 You mus a get it from the foreign land  
 You mus a check say me a politician  
 You don’ know say me a musician

Gun shotta it nuh respect no one  
 It kill soldier man, it kill our policeman  
 It kill policeman, also badman  
 It kill badman, also civilian  
 It kill civilian, also Christian  
 It kill animal, also human

Gunman, say tell me whey you get yuh gun from  
 You mus ‘a get it from the foreign land  
 You wan come shoot dung your own black man  
 —Yellowman, “Gunman”

Prahlad also yearns for the moral superiority of the roots era. Calling the Marley years the “golden age of reggae,” he argues that they were characterized by “culturally,

spiritually, and artistically inspired lyrics and music that may never be duplicated” (Prahlad 2001, xxiii) For Prahlad this socially aware reggae was international in scope and sound whereas dancehall was a concerted attempt to re-Jamaicanize reggae. But, tellingly, dancehall had little of the cultural value of roots reggae and instead was occupied largely with slackness and violence. Prahlad interprets the lyrics of roots icons Culture and Burning Spear to make his point that dancehall suffers from an inferior moral code, telling us that Culture sees dancehall as unfit for children and Burning Spear wants a return to cultural themes in music. Prahlad’s treatment of Marley is typical—not only does Marley represent the apex of real reggae, he marvels that this “genius” has not been given the Nobel Prize for his “contribution to the betterment of human kind” (Ibid, xxiv). It is this sort of cult of personality that informs much of the writing about Marley and led to a backlash in the foreign press against dancehall because it is constantly compared to a sanctified version of Marley.

Chuck Foster’s *Roots, Rock Reggae* is a typical example of how journalists have conceived of the de-evolution thesis. Foster writes a column in the pioneer reggae and world music magazine *The Beat*. He has followed reggae for decades and his insight is valid. It is Foster’s view that Yellowman is antithetical to Bob Marley and that dancehall is in binary opposition to roots reggae.

That [Yellowman’s] star began to rise just as Bob Marley passed is perhaps no coincidence. Yellow represented a 360-degree spin from the social concerns of the seventies and helped kick off the “new” dancehall era with songs replete with sexual braggadocio, misogyny, and violent imagery, pandering to concerns earlier reggae artists might call “Babylon” (Foster 1999, 157).

Foster’s interpretation of Yellowman’s repertoire and impact, while falling well within

the normal description music journalists have employed again and again when looking at the deejay, are ahistorical and de-contextualized. An unassuming reader would think that “sexual braggadocio, misogyny, and violent imagery” were nowhere to be found in reggae music previous to Yellowman, which is clearly not the case. Foster pits Yellowman against a morally cleaner, socially concerned and pacifistic Marley Marley, of course, wrote his share of sexually charged songs (“Stir it Up,” “Is this Love,” “Guava Jelly”) and his extra marital affairs and numerous outside children were well publicized. Cooper (2004) has expertly deflated the “Saint Marley” image in her analysis of Marley’s treatment of women. Marley was also not above calling for violence. One poignant example is the line “I feel like bombing a church now that I know the preacher is lying” from “Talkin’ Blues.” For Marley peace meant freedom and the presence of universal equal rights and justice. He did not necessarily rule out violence as a viable option for attaining peace and the tone of his songs reflects this.

In his informative and enjoyable *Bass Culture: When Reggae was King*, Bradley (2001) defends dancehall against detractors that seek to disparage it as simplistic and low culture. Yet it is telling though that out of 540 pages, only 39—the last two chapters—are devoted to dancehall, when dancehall accounts for half the time period he covers in the book. This privileging of the ska and roots era of Jamaican music over dancehall is rampant among histories of reggae where dancehall is often all but a footnote. Further, Bradley’s treatment of Yellowman is typical. To his credit he does give the reader context into the extent that Yellowman dominated reggae at home and abroad in the post-Marley years, but his portrayal of the artist is in strict binary terms, over and against cultural deejays such as Brigadier Jerry, Charlie Chaplin and Josey Wales. Speaking of the 1987

live bootleg release *Slackness Versus Pure Culture*, a clash album with Charlie Chaplin, Bradley calls it a “stylistic marker buoy” that “made palpable what had been happening to reggae music during the last five or six years.” It was Yellowman’s “thorough routing of the righteous” that Bradley sensed (Ibid, 508). In other words, Yellow’s slackness had all but eclipsed roots and culture so that “previously spiritual deejays” such as Toyah, and Ranking Joe started to reinvent themselves as slack artists. Bradley’s timeline is off here. Ranking Joe’s “Lift Up Yuh Frock” and other slack tunes predate this by seven years. Plus, Bradley does not take into account Yellowman’s vast cultural catalogue and his insistence—even on this bootleg—that he is a deejay who can sing both slackness and culture.

Elsewhere Bradley has offered a more rounded view of Yellowman. In his review of Yellowman’s discography on CD, Yellowman is given credit for making the “break from the previous era’s roots deejays and [setting] up the dancehall styles that have dominated since” and is called the “final link between traditional reggae and what happened after “Sleng Teng,” meaning the dominance of digital dancehall (Bradley 1996, 355). He charges mainstream music critics for denouncing the sexism in Yellowman’s lyrics, defending his slackness as inoffensive, tongue in cheek and very funny. And he recognizes that Yellowman routinely issued cultural songs alongside slackness songs, calling them “dread” or “righteous” (Ibid). But Bradley also sees slackness and culture as antagonistic to each other, even though Yellowman can do both, and he positions cultural songs as more worthy, calling them “proper.” He cites as the best songs on *Mister Yellowman* and *Zungguzungguguzungguzeng* cultural tracks such as “Duppy or A Gunman” and “Natty Sat Upon a Rock” on the former and the title track on the latter.

The most remarkable thing about coming back to these albums ten years later is that you remember more of the ‘proper’ tracks than you do the slackness, even though it was the latter that seemed such a big deal at the time (Ibid , 356)

Anderson, writing in *Sound Recording Reviews*, offered a musicological history of Jamaican music and found the same obverse relationship between roots and dancehall that plagued other journalists “Reggae moved away from the smoky, mystical flavors and the religious/political lyrical focus of the roots-and-culture period to become more rhythmically aggressive and, significantly, much more violent and explicitly sexual in nature” (Anderson 2004, 211) For Anderson the de-evolution was clear cut “As electronic percussion and synthesizers pushed guitarists, bass players, and wind players from the studio, reggae’s rhythms became more minimalist and more robotic, in some cases, entire songs were built on an aggressive and unchanging three-against-two triplet pattern” (Ibid )

Not all media outlets have painted Yellowman with the same brush, nor have they all implicitly supported the de-evolution thesis Unlike many foreign journalists, many Jamaican writers and international dancehall fans in the black and alternative presses realize that dancehall is a diverse genre with many themes and sounds *The Gleaner* has routinely revolved between music writers praising dancehall and columnists and writers of letters to the editor decrying its loose morals and violence Canada’s Beth Lesser and England’s Ray Hurford treated dancehall as a valid and important youth and musical movement in their respective magazines, *Reggae Quarterly* and *Small Axe* Britain’s black music magazine *Black Echoes* also covered dancehall next to roots reggae, soul, funk and jazz without paying homage to the de-evolution thesis And in his history of

reggae the Jamaican born Klive Walker, speaking of the dominance of dancehall over roots reggae in the early eighties, points out that dancehall had two main divisions a secular, X-rated stream lead by Yellowman, and a conscious stream filled with social commentary and Rasta theology led by Brigadier Jerry Walker does characterize Yellowman as only a secular deejay, but he does not make the implicit value judgment that slackness dancehall is a lesser form of the genre. Instead, he sees it as a form that competed with conscious dancehall (Walker 2005, 25)

By and large, however, Yellowman has been targeted in the mainstream press, both local and foreign, as the progenitor of the slackness style and a stunted form of reggae that strayed from cultural concerns. Walker, who I argued above steers clear of the de-evolution thesis, does share Stolzoff's view that the eighties saw a lacuna of culture tracks "there has been a significant shift in thematic approach from the justice and equity sentiments that were dominant in seventies roots reggae to the language of sex and violence that has characterized dancehall through much of the '90s" (Ibid , 247). Walker locates this shift in the "replacement of Rasta sage as the most influential figure in the ghetto communities of Kingston by the overarching presence of the drug 'don'" (Ibid.)

It is necessary to point out that not all reggae in the seventies was Rasta-centric. There were many pop reggae songs, love songs and, of course, slack songs during this period. But "because the Rasta renaissance coincided with the first major break-through of reggae music on the international pop market, many foreign listeners were led to assume that Rastafarian culture and reggae were inseparable" (Manuel 1995, 166)

Jamaican entertainment journalist Trevor "Boots" Harris has argued that because reggae was marketed internationally as Rasta music, international audiences associate

Rasta-centric roots reggae with authenticity of the genre (Lesser 2008, 186) Once this link was established, Lesser argues, “it was hard to throw an entirely different model into the mix without getting resistance” (Ibid )

Reggae music has been marketed as “Rasta music” by US and European record companies This brought about an international concept that reggae music was, and should only be played by Rastafarian musicians (Harris in Lesser 2008, 186)

This marketing tactic had to do with record companies wanting to reproduce a formula that was already successful Chris Blackwell felt that he could market Bob Marley initially because Marley was the real-life version of the musical outlaw Rhygin in the film *The Harder They Come* (Salewicz and Boot 2001, 72) As Marley came to also embody a new counterculture hero—the Rasta Revolutionary—record companies scrambled to find more artists that could extend the brand <sup>145</sup>

Jamaican popular music has always been more varied than the one sided Rasta image that the music industry promoted for many years in its attempts to capitalize on the popularity of outstanding Rasta reggae artists Bob Marley, Peter Tosh, Bunny Wailer, Burning Spear, and others working in the same vein (Manuel 1995, 166-167)

When Canadian journalist Beth Lesser first went to Jamaica in the early eighties she had expected “everyone to be Rasta and dreads and ital, and when we got there they weren’t” (Lesser 2009) Her introduction to reggae in Canada in the seventies had led her to believe that Rasta and reggae were always linked but this was not true

My own experience with this may just prove my own naiveté but as a reggae fan for nearly 30 years, music journalist, musician in a reggae band, a former resident of

---

<sup>145</sup> Stephens (1998, 145) has traced the evolution of Marley’s image from that of a Rastafarian outlaw in the seventies to a natural family man in the eighties and a natural mystic in the nineties

Bermuda where reggae dominates the popular youth culture, I too was surprised when I first arrived in Kingston to find very little evidence of what I thought would be the all-pervasive Rastafari-reggae culture. Here is an excerpt from my field journal, written on the morning of the second day of my first trip into the field.

*February 13, 2008*

*It has occurred to me that one of the things I need to be aware of in this project is my own preconceptions about Jamaica. My knowledge about Jamaica and its culture is largely from reggae songs and books—neither of which are a good substitute for the real thing. For instance, tourism ads (government and otherwise) for Jamaica lead you to believe that there are dreads everywhere—which there are not. I've seen very few Rastas and I would have thought that Kingston would be a hotbed of dreads. Similarly, while there is a lot of dancehall (in taxis for instance) I hear mostly R&B or even rock. Maybe this is just my locale. Right now I'm listening to someone's radio that is playing Christian reggae.<sup>146</sup>*

I make this somewhat embarrassing point to illustrate how reggae fans outside of Jamaica perceive the island only through its cultural product. I had the added benefit of reading scholarship on reggae and Rastafari written by Jamaicans, but my preconceptions about reggae and Jamaica remained. I assumed reggae would be everywhere and that manifestations of Rastafari would be blatant. As I became more familiar with Jamaican culture I found that both these cultural elements were pervasive, though not dominating the landscape.

Even in Jamaica, the ghost of Bob Marley, patron saint of reggae's golden era, hangs over dancehall like a shroud. Buju Banton recently complained that the public's fixation on the Marley brand has hurt dancehall's growth because all new artists are compared to Marley (*The Jamaican Observer*, Monday, April 27, 2009). Banton was

---

<sup>146</sup> This was actually my second trip to Jamaica but the first for this project and the first where I spend time in Kingston. A previous journey in 2003 was to Mandeville to visit family.

heavily criticized in the press by the Marley cult for attacking one of Jamaican's and reggae's sacred cows but inherent in the critiques of Banton were the trappings of the de-evolution thesis. Many writers condemned Banton's music or dancehall as a lesser music form than Marley's. Cooper, in defence of Banton and generations of artists younger than Marley, blames the curators of roots reggae's legacy for their ageist attitudes toward dancehall.

Buju Banton is the voice of a whole generation of not-so-young singers, players of instruments and riders of 'riddims' who are crying out to be taken seriously by elderly gatekeepers who assume the right to determine who is great and who is doomed to mediocrity (Cooper 2009).

Marley's domination of the reggae imagination abroad and even at home fuels the point of view that everything after Marley is somehow less authentic, less aesthetically pleasing and less cultural. Roger Steffens joked at the 2008 Global Reggae Conference that in order to get a reggae Grammy award, a reggae artist needed to change their last name to Marley (Steffens 2008). In fact, this is not far off the mark. Since the Grammys began issuing an award for Best Reggae Album in 1985, thirteen awards have been given to artists connected with the Marley brand. These include three awards for Ziggy Marley and the Melody Makers (1988, 1989, 1997), three awards for Damian Marley (2001, 2005),<sup>147</sup> one for Ziggy Marley (2006), one for Stephen Marley (2007), and one for Bob Marley himself, who won a Grammy Lifetime Achievement Award in 2001. Marley's former bandmates have also picked up Grammys: three for Bunny Wailer (1990, 1994, 1996) who won twice with tribute albums to Bob Marley, and one for Peter Tosh (1987).

---

<sup>147</sup> In 2005 Damian won in both Best Reggae Album and Best Urban/Alternative Performance categories for *Welcome to Jamrock*.

The Marley name is so powerful in the Recording Academy that Stephen Marley beat out Buju Banton and again won the Grammy in 2010 for *Mind Control Acoustic*—an acoustic version of an album he had previously won a Grammy for in 2007. Not only that, his brother Julian Marley was nominated in the same year for *Awake*, despite the fact his album only sold 30,000 copies as of the nomination date (Campbell 2009). In fact, only five non-Marley dancehall artists have won Grammy's in the 25 years of the academy's existence. The sheer monopoly of the Marley brand over the Reggae Grammy—pop music's greatest scale of achievement—is proof that the popular music establishment still sees the Marley brand as “authentic” reggae, it is the yardstick with which to measure all others against. The Grammys represent acceptance into the mainstream American pop market, something that has eluded most reggae artists. Even the first reggae Grammy in 1985 went to what at the time was seen as Jamaica's strongest roots band, a Rastafarian band that carried the conscious torch of the Marley era, Black Uhuru. Of the five artists nominated that year, four were roots reggae acts: Black Uhuru, Steel Pulse, Jimmy Cliff and Peter Tosh. The last nominee was dancehall sensation Yellowman, who subsequently penned a hilarious lyric called “Reggae Get the Grammy” about his pride at being the only deejay nominated and his delight at reggae's international recognition.

In 1987 *The Gleaner's Reports in Sports 'n' Arts* featured interviews with Jamaican authorities that praised Marley and condemned dancehall. Sam McKay, a deputy commissioner, complained that some of dancehall's lyrics promoted drug use and was counterproductive with police actions. Marley's music, “in contrast, portrays hope and morality.” Assistant commissioner Barry Cross charged dancehall with “using words offensive to decent people,” while in Marley's music “there is some moral.” And

Sergeant DR Buchanan, in an attempt to argue for the superiority and authenticity of Marley's music, considered contemporary deejays' music full of "stupidity," in contrast to what Buchanan felt was Marley's music, which was "real, real, real" (Harris 1987)

One of the most vocal proponents of the de-evolution thesis is Jamaican pastor, columnist and radio and television host Ian Boyne. Boyne routinely uses his column to denigrate dancehall and those that defend it, especially if they are connected to the University of the West Indies. To be fair, Boyne does not see all dancehall as violent, materialistic and slack. "Of course, there are positive, uplifting, conscious lyrics in the dancehall," he wrote in one article (Boyne 2008a). However, Boyne re-historicizes roots reggae as something wholly positive, uplifting and serious. It is as if Marley-era reggae could do no wrong.

Reggae differed from mere pop music which was for entertainment and frivolity. Reggae was serious without being sombre. Reggae is message music. The classic reggae artistes were acutely aware that they were not just minstrels. Their songs had us singing along and rocking, most definitely. But there was a message, which represented not just 'brawta', it was its life force. For it came from the bowels of the working class experience with oppression, injustice, dehumanisation and exclusion. Reggae's appeal is its innate humanism and universalism. For in decrying oppression, colonialism, imperialism and injustice, it was saying, forcefully, that these features are alien to our common heritage as human beings. This was not how humans were supposed to live. We were not supposed to be segregated by class, race, gender, religion and nationality (Boyne 2008b).

For Boyne, the reggae of the Wailers, Burning Spear, Israel Vibration is authentic reggae because it made powerful social statements and did so without glorifying sex and violence. Dancehall today, he writes, has de-evolved.

What is the message of dancehall today in its most dominant trend? It's about the "gal dem business," the objectification and commodification of women, the glorification of promiscuity. It is about power over women's bodies (Ibid.)

Boyne counterpoises most dancehall against roots reggae as frivolous, materialistic, hedonist and violent. He offers a rosy gloss of roots reggae that ignores its own sexism, marginalization of women, glorification of gangs, and odes to the pleasures of the sexual act. By reconstructing roots reggae as fundamentally clashing with the values of dancehall, Boyne selectively chooses how musical and social history should be read and ignores the obvious continuities between dancehall and roots reggae. His insistence that dancehall has no message of substance echoes Seaga and others who fail to look past their own moralities to see that dancehall does indeed provide a social and political message based on the values of the black lower class. But for Boyne it is clear that “gal dem business” has no potential for social uplift or political critique but is only a means of male domination and the promotion of promiscuity.

To sum up so far, critics, mostly older and non-Jamaican, who have been responsible for the way reggae history has been visualized have conceived of a de-evolution in the genre from roots reggae in the seventies to dancehall in the eighties. The evaluative judgments these journalists made resulted in Yellowman being targeted as the cause of the downfall of reggae. Even in Jamaica much of the discourse on dancehall in the media has amounted to “moralizing and sermonizing,” decrying its hedonism and negative effect on the country’s youth (Hope 2006, 18). The de-evolution thesis is generally based on two criteria: aesthetics and morality. First, dancehall reggae is understood as a less complex music form than its forebears and therefore is demonized as being simplistic, primitive, repetitive, and all sounding the same. Second, dancehall is considered morally reprehensible, morally corrupt or devoid of ethics, unlike roots reggae.

which is interpreted as dancehall's conscience-ridden parent Dancehall, it seems, is treated as the hedonistic progeny

I now turn to a discussion of how Yellowman has been treated in the scholarly literature As in the above examples of music journalism, Yellowman and dancehall do not fare much better in the hands of the Academy

### ***Nursery Rhymes, Animal Noises and Anti-woman Jive Talk: Yellowman in the Scholarly Literature***

Dancehall culture has not occupied the research agendas of many in academia and until recently the scholarly debates about dancehall were more often than not "demonizing, infantilizing, and romanticizing" (Hope 2006, 19) Most scholars that have mentioned Yellowman have not looked at him in any depth Like media accounts, he is often the scapegoat for dancehall's sexual trends in the eighties but with little time taken to think about him critically For instance, Chevannes says that Yellowman began the bawdy trend in dancehall that turned away from the conscious lyrics of Bob Marley (Chevannes 1999) Gilroy, for whom Bob Marley is the epitome of cultural reggae, gives Yellowman short shrift by tagging him as the lead proponent of the "decline of radical reggae" (Gilroy 1987, 188) Without bothering to analyse the over 15 albums Yellowman had released by 1987, Gilroy is convinced that Yellowman only contributed two political songs ("Soldier Take Over" and "Operation Radication") to reggae and then "opted for the safety of nursery rhymes, animal noises and anti-woman jive talk" (Ibid) It is interesting to note that not only did several cultural Rastafarian singers also use nursery rhyme melodies for their material (for instance Max Romeo's "Three Blind Mice" and

Jacob Millers' "Peace Treaty Special") but the first time Yellowman did this on record—"Even Tide Fire" uses the melody of "London Bridge is Falling Down"—was in response to a politically motivated fire that killed 153 elderly women. In a country where it was dangerous for artists to offer public political commentary, Yellowman's use of nursery rhyme here can hardly be considered safe. And Gilroy's comment about animal noises—referring to Yellowman's sometime sidekick Fathead, whose trademark was to punctuate Yellowman's lyrics with sounds like "oink," "ribbit," "eh-a" or "right,"—not only ignores the well-established tradition in jazz and reggae to use nonsensical words and phrases for scat purposes, but also is indicative of the aesthetic argument against dancehall as somehow a more primitive music by less skilled artists.

According to Gilroy, Yellowman led his contemporary deejays in an effort to steer "the dance-hall side of roots culture away from political and historical themes and towards 'slackness' crude and often insulting wordplay pronouncing on sexuality and sexual antagonism" (Ibid). What puzzles me here, though, is that Gilroy singles out artists such as Peter Metro and Brigadier Jerry as deejays that "fought to maintain rhymes with a social content" (Ibid). Besides the fact that Gilroy feels "social content" and slackness are mutually exclusive, he says nothing of the fact that these militants in the war against slackness were not only good friends of Yellowman but they were in fact sparring partners on stage and on record. One of Peter Metro's biggest hits was a duet with Yellowman ("The Girl is Mine") and Brigadier Jerry was the first major deejay to give Yellowman a break and later often shared a stage with him. The fact that Metro and Briggy did not shun Yellowman should be taken into account if they, as Gilroy implies, were fighting against slackness. The argument could be made that Metro and Briggy were

complicit in the use of slackness in dancehall by performing with Yellowman

Gilroy's attempts to set up a binary between culture and slack deejays does not reflect reality. There is a fluid continuum between slackness and culture in dancehall, even artists typically described as culture artists accept the place of slackness as a viable aspect of dancehall culture. Josey Wales, who targeted slackness in "Slackness Done" and "Culture a Lick," accepts that dancehall is first and foremost about the freedom to express your mind. As such, he and Yellowman not only released two albums together but it is his opinion that slackness is as valid an expression as culture.

Brent Hagerman: You're known as a culture deejay and you have songs against slackness. Yet you and Yellowman did a clash album together. How can a culture deejay and the King of Slack do an album together?

Josey Wales: There wasn't no barrier there and there is no restriction. Yellow was a warm, welcoming person with an accommodating spirit, I am that sort of person as well. The job requires what you preach—he preaches slackness, I preach culture, so we get it together. And Yellow could preach a little culture too.

BH: And yet you recorded the song "Slackness Done" where you say you want to clean up the dance?

JW: We didn't take anything personal. It was humorous and speaking your mind at the same time. So when I tell Yellow "Slackness Done" and we must clean up the dancehall and slackness in the backyard hiding, I'm serious with that. And when Yellow says "Me want a yellow girl pon my yellow hip," him serious.

BH: So it's just two different philosophies but you're not going to argue over it?

JW: We're not going to argue over it 'cause who am I to dictate that's my opinion. (Wales 2009)

Another scholarly depiction of Yellowman can be found among Cooper's writings. Cooper, who elsewhere has taken great pains to revalorize both dancehall as a legitimate cultural expression and as being worthy of scholarly inquiry, harshly takes

Yellowman to task for the vulgarity and level of commodification of female bodies he indulges in in his music “woman is reduced to a collection of body parts which seem to function independent of her will” (Cooper 1995, 163) Cooper’s later work, however, revalorizes Shabba Ranks, a prominent slackness deejay that follows Yellowman, and she finds in his lyrics examples of feminine sexual agency and celebrations of full figured Afro-Caribbean women who do not fit Eurocentric beauty standards (Cooper 2004) Cooper’s theory that slackness is a metaphorical revolt against mainstream norms and values can easily be supplanted to include Yellowman—indeed that is the theoretical backbone of this dissertation—but in the reductionist treatment she offers of Yellowman I believe she is guilty of not applying her own theory to him <sup>148</sup>

Thomas, while not mentioning Yellowman specifically, follows the standard binary thinking around dancehall and roots reggae, saying that dancehall distanced itself from the revolutionary politics of the seventies “whereas previous reggae music had emphasized social critique and a belief in redemption, early dancehall music reflected a ghetto glorification of sex, guns, and the drug trade” (Thomas 2005, 81) Thomas rightfully points out that the middle class’s fear of dancehall was based on their concern for the power it had in shaping behaviour and public perceptions of Jamaicans

Anthologist and dancehall historian Stolzoff claims that the eighties marked a transition in Jamaican popular culture away from the moral leadership of Rastafari to entertainment forms that celebrated consumerism, sexuality and gunplay He hails pre-

---

<sup>148</sup> I do not mean to denigrate Cooper in any way here, but merely point out that her critique of Yellowman ignores a large body of his work and was not given the same consideration as other dancehall artists such as Shabba Ranks, Lady Saw, Buju Banton and Ninjaman Indeed, in personal conversations with Cooper about this dissertation, she has been extremely helpful in assisting me with thinking through how to frame Yellowman’s life and work

dancehall music as simply “reggae” and finds in it a “profound message of antiracism, political protest, and spiritual redemption” whereas post-reggae wallowed in “slackness, a genre preoccupied with themes dedicated to pornography, homophobia, misogyny, and hypermasculinity” (Stolzoff 2000, 100) Stolzoff cites Marley’s death in 1981 as the beginning of this decline In his view then, Rastafari played an important role in reggae culture in the seventies and steered the moral compass of lower class society away from slackness and violence and toward black nationalism, Africa, peace and justice Stolzoff maps the rise of slackness in dancehall over and against the moral degeneration of Rastafari precepts

Stolzoff goes further and pits slackness directly in opposition with religious sexual morés, both Christian and Rastafarian He asserts that the new generation of artists singing about sex were “baldheads” (non-Rastas) and defied and overturned Rasta’s “austere version of sexual morality” because they were based on mainstream notions of sexuality (Ibid , 105) There is truth in this—Rastafarian sexual ethics are derived from a mix of rural Jamaican and colonial Christian morality, but Stolzoff is too quick to set up a binary opposition between Rastafari ethics and dancehall ethics Nowhere is this more apparent than Stolzoff’s section on Yellowman Like Cooper and Gilroy, Stolzoff portrays Yellowman as the chicken that laid the slackness egg (this metaphor purposely leaves open the primordial chicken/egg dilemma), the entertainer that almost single-handedly wrested moral leadership from the Rastafarian reggae community and stamped out culture with slackness This gloss misses the fact that Yellowman considered himself a Rastafarian, and had several Rastafarian songs dating from as early as 1981, as well as numerous songs of obvious social importance That Yellowman was able to contest

mainstream morés using slackness, and do so from a Rastafarian worldview, demonstrates that Rastafari was still a valid source of moral regulation in the eighties. It also wrongly assumes that slackness and social critique are mutually exclusive.

Burton offers the term the “de-Rastafarianization of the youth culture” for the turn from culture to slackness (Burton 1997, 138). This de-Rastafarianization goes hand in hand with “the shift in musical styles from reggae to ragga/dance hall, from dreadlocked prophet-singer to the immaculately tonsured, designer-dressed DJ, from ganja to cocaine, and from Ital to McDonald’s” (Ibid). What this means for Burton is that slackness triumphed over political consciousness in the eighties. “There are few signs in contemporary ragga of the political, or even the racial, preoccupations that powered the music of the Ethiopians and the Wailers. At first glance it is *punaani*, *glamiti*, and *glibiti*,<sup>149</sup> and not much else” (Ibid).

Burton seems to think that dancehall is all about sex, which it is not. But he also supports the dominant view within the culture/slack discourse that if a song uses sexuality or obscenities it must be politically and racially disengaged. He sees slackness as devoid of political agenda and unable to change the hegemonic structures of mainstream society. Burton’s inability to see that symbolic revolt can lead to actual change, and his limited knowledge of both dancehall and its revolutionary accomplishments, blinds him to the fact, for instance, that Yellowman’s slackness led to tangible benefits for the albino community. Slackness is what made Yellowman the world’s top deejay and Yellowman used slackness to contest dominant racial hierarchies and subvert mainstream notions of sexuality. By doing so, albinos in Jamaica have gained

---

<sup>149</sup> These are all euphemisms for vagina.

social credibility Yellowman also sang non-slack openly political songs (“Budget,” “Operation Radication,” “Free Africa”) and critiqued mainstream society and government from behind the veil of slackness (“Galong, Galong, Galong,” “Gone a South Africa”) Burton is complicit in the description of dancehall as the de-evolution of roots reggae and uses slackness as the scapegoat to do it

Tafari-Ama (2006) follows these scholars in viewing Marley as a fulcrum between the culture and slack eras Dancehall deejays in the seventies had positive messages of social uplift and socio-political consciousness but this focus changed in the eighties with the passing of Bob Marley and the entrance of Yellowman For Tafari-Ama, Yellowman changes reggae and pulls it away from cultural consciousness into a realm filled with slackness

### ***Slackness: Empowering the Underclasses***

Critical theories of dancehall offered by Hope (2006) and Cooper (1995, 2004) remap dancehall as a loci of feminine empowerment, slackness as a post-colonial critique of dominant Eurocentric values and gun lyrics as a “theatrical pose” designed to “imitate and adapt the sartorial and ideological ‘style’ of the heroes and villains of imported movies” (Cooper 2004, 47) For Cooper, the carnality and social protest need not be separate “The complex fusion of the political and the erotic has always characterized reggae music” (Ibid, 77) She sees continuity in Marley’s “incendiary, confrontational lyrics of class war” and the X-rated celebrations of carnality in Shabba Ranks’ songs because they “share a common concern with destabilizing the social space of the

respectable middle class” (Ibid , 81)

Following this, I turn now to a treatment of Yellowman’s slackness as socially engaged using political scientist Obika Gray’s (2004) understanding of how slackness operated to bring about tangible advances for the underclasses in Jamaica in the late seventies. Gray’s importance to understanding the function of slackness in Jamaican society in the late seventies and early eighties—and to this thesis—cannot be overstated. What follows is an overview of Gray’s thesis, which I will unpack and apply to Yellowman.

For moral critics of Yellowman and dancehall who refuse to allow that licentiousness and social critique can go hand in hand, Gray offers powerful proof of a conscious plot on the part of the ghetto dwellers in Kingston to invert the sexual norms of society as a protest against a racist and classist system. Gray defines slackness as “indecent, public sexual licence, moral degeneracy and erotic lawlessness among the rebellious black poor” and says that slackness enabled lower class blacks to exhibit control over their own value system and openly refuse society’s dominant definitions of civility (Ibid , 310).

Slackness is a form of sexual transgression and as such was merely another repertoire employed by the black lumpenproletariat in its ongoing clash with dominant groups. Just as racial identity and class allegiance disrupted social relations in earlier periods, slackness now provoked huge social divisions (Ibid , 312).

The traditional value system in Jamaica, or “Jamaicanness,” is derived from the cultural inheritances of Euro-Christian colonialism, Afrocentric Ethiopianism and secular American materialism. The intersection of these produced a norm-identity where

dominance was given to white over black, rich over poor, literary culture over oral and expressive culture. And even though “all Jamaicans breached these binary opposites and lived their lives every day according to a jamboree of values” (Ibid, 310) the lighter skinned elites set the standards of what Jamaicanness entailed and stood guard over “moral membership” in proper society. By promoting slackness through dancehall, the lower classes were in effect denying the state the right to define what is normal or morally correct by rejecting the mainstream value system in favour of their own. The elites saw the black urban poor as moral failures in need of salvation. They were mapped with racial-sexual stereotypes that attached unbridled ghetto sexuality to blackness and poverty. Sexuality, race, class and gender were all determinants of social inclusion and exclusion—sexual identity helped determine cultural membership. Because the lower classes eschewed Jamaica’s religious and cultural heritage of moral propriety they were barred from full moral membership in Jamaican society. In some senses slackness was also a scapegoat for the elites who saw it as “the distillate of all the cultural deficits” of the lower class (Ibid )

Slackness in popular culture in the early eighties divided the country, it was seen as incendiary, a symbol of a crumbling value system and civilized society, of the poor crossing social boundary lines and threatening the moral order of society. Far from being just about the elite’s embarrassment at what they perceived was the sexual uninhibitedness of poor blacks, the concern was about political power. In colonial settlements sex and power were inextricably linked and the regulation of sexual relations was fundamental to the colonial project. Sexual regulation, like race, was a form of social classification that was at the heart of keeping the rulers apart from their subjects. Stoler’s

research shows that sexual regulation was a conscious political act that was central to the management of colonial societies and hierarchies of race, gender and class (Stoler 2002, 47) “The colonial politics of exclusion,” she writes, “was contingent on constructing categories Colonial control was predicated on identifying who was ‘white,’ who was ‘native,’ and which children could become citizens rather than subjects, on which were legitimate progeny and which were not” (Ibid 43) Colonials were concerned chiefly with defining who was “European ” Physical and social markers such as race, religion, education, wealth and skin colour were ambiguous at best and so Stoler argues that these indicators were given meaning, or read against the backdrop of sexual unions

Social and legal standing derived from the cultural prism through which color was viewed, from which the silences, acknowledgments, and denials of the social circumstances in which one’s parents had sex ultimately, inclusion or exclusion required regulating the sexual, conjugal, and domestic life of both European colonials and their subjects (Ibid )

In the Caribbean specifically, black sexuality was feared by the ruling classes, it represented anarchy, a twisting of the way things were normally organized and managed (Gray 2004) In much of the British Empire the term “Black Peril” exemplified this attitude it was the fear that black colonized men would and could sexually conquer white European women Some British colonies went so far as to introduce race-specific legislation that only punished sexual assaults against European women, “sexual abuse of black women was not classified as rape and therefore was not legally actionable, nor did rapes committed by white men lead to prosecution” (Stoler 2002, 58) Sexual subversion cannot be divorced from political resistance in the colonial mindset, sexual threats connoted resistance to the colonial system where everything had its proper place in

society The “Black Peril,” or the perceived dangers of black sexuality, was akin to political insurgence (Ibid )

In Jamaica the upper classes feared the unbridled sexuality of the lower classes as much as they feared black lower class violence “The policing of black lower-class sexuality was thus as central to the management of social and political power as the policing of black lower-class violence” (Gray 2004, 314)

In this racially divided and class-stratified society, the more the black poor policed their sexuality and kept their erotic displays out of public view, the better were their chances of social approval and the more likely their inclusion in the community of the respectable people-nation (Ibid , 313)

Moral regulation by the state was imperative for the ruling classes to remain in power, sexual docility meant political submissiveness A lower class that internalized the upper class’s moral regime of respectability would not act out, push boundaries or challenge norms If the lower classes sought respectability in colonial terms they needed to imitate the behaviour and values of their colonial leaders, being in the ruler’s eye “good” citizens

But by the late seventies, inclusion in the respectable nation had become more and more elusive Expressions of black nationality a decade before were retooled into expressions of black sexuality in the eighties, both were politically motivated protests These expressions of open sexuality were a direct threat to the power structures of the post-colonial society Once the poor exerted agency over their own sexuality they announced to society that its moral sway over the black lower class was at an end The poor were no longer controlled by a desire for respectability manufactured by their moral regulators the church and government

This experiment was not accidental. As Gray reminds us, “sexual extremism in the slums did not occur because the ghetto poor did not know better” (Ibid , 314). Religious knowledge and morality ran high in Jamaica’s poor communities “many gangsters deferred to Christian values and a few even read their Bibles” (Ibid ). Church membership is high in Kingston and the number of denominations religious consumers can choose from is dizzying. Slackness was not the result of moral ignorance or even anti-religious sentiment. Instead, slackness was planned and executed with social upheaval in mind and, as I argue in Section III Chapter 3, in the case of Yellowman this upheaval was accomplished in conjunction with a religiously mediated understanding of correct morality. Slackness was designed to turn the elite’s value system upside down, to intimidate and to threaten (Ibid , 313).

Slackness and the celebration of it by ghetto youth and popular performers in the eighties seemed to announce to the society the end of its moral sway over the black lower class. In song, dance and theatre, orthodox sexual morality gave way to uninhibited celebration of all things libidinal. Sexual extremism for its own sake and as a repertoire for challenging social conventions now became the dominant form of expression within an otherwise variegated ghetto culture (Ibid , 313).

Foucault, speaking of the discourse of sexuality, has shown how speaking about sexuality in a repressive atmosphere is in itself an act of power.

If sex is repressed, that is, condemned to prohibition, non-existence, and silence, then the mere fact that one is speaking about it has the appearance of a deliberate transgression. A person who holds forth in such language places himself to a certain extent outside the reach of power, he upsets established law (Foucault 1990, 6).

Foucault, of course, was talking about the Victorian medical profession, clergy, demographers and psychiatrists, but maintained that moderns also change our tone of

voice or strike a different pose due to the subversive nature of talking about sexuality I see dancehall artists that engage in slackness as performing a similar role here, though without the inherent shame Slackness allowed artists to enact a “deliberate transgression” against society and in doing so upset the established norm-value The fact that they spoke of sexuality was not the problem—Foucault’s work on sexuality shows that despite our understanding of the Victorian era as sexually repressed, the discourse on sexuality underwent a literary explosion Sexual discourse in Jamaica existed outside of popular culture to be sure Jamaican bourgeois society targeted sexuality as a key area of intervention with the lower black classes Marriage and monogamy were strongly encouraged by missionaries as prerequisites for salvation and sanctity Black sexuality was feared and therefore subjected to controlling mechanisms and strategies by the state Under this Foucauldian reading, Jamaican dancehall culture became sexualized because of the state’s widespread and far reaching obsession with sexuality In their attempt to repress sexuality, the state a) encouraged discourse around sexuality leading to greater public interest in matters of sexuality, and b) sexualized the black lower class to the point where the lower class adopted and believed this representation of themselves and began to, in effect, refract it back at the bourgeois Dancehall culture, with its revealing outfits, gyrating dancers, crude lyrics and popular appeal, confirmed for the elite imagination the racially embedded sexuality among the black lower classes (Gray 2004, 310) Dancehall did not remain safely ensconced in the ghetto Its thousand watt outdoor speakers bathed every corner of Kingston with its rumbling bass and slack lyrics Dancehall was explicit in its attempt to re-colonize urban space by disturbing the peace of upper echelon of society Marley once sang “I want to disturb my neighbour” in the song “Bad Card ”

Cooper interprets his words with dancehall culture in mind. They became an anthem, “the politics of noise. Music is not mere entertainment but ideological weaponry, disturbing the peace” (Cooper 2004, 75)

### ***Yellowman’s Critical Slackness***

By 1981 Yellowman was the leader of the slackness movement. Yellowman and his ilk were despised by the upper classes and the institutions that enforced the traditional colonial norm-identity. He was very adept at shocking society by crossing racial, gender and moral boundaries—as an albino he was not supposed to be in the limelight, nor was he supposed to be sexually virile and boastful. Scandal for Yellowman was a promotional tool. But unlike calypsonians, who spent considerable energies roasting the upper classes with details of intimate exploits every year during the carnival season in the calypso tents, he was the scandal (Rohlehr 1990)

Yellowman’s popularity among the lower classes was predicated on the fact that he could disturb elite society, he was a voice for the underprivileged and a good comedian too. Dancehall, like calypso before it, disguised social criticism with wit, double entendre and slackness. Calypso has been called the most “effective political weapon in Trinidad” because it enjoyed the support and attention of the populace and was able to introduce issues important to the impoverished and oppressed classes, of which the calypsonians themselves belonged, into the public sphere (Oxaal 1968, 81)

What politician, who must harangue from the rostrum, can boast of a better opportunity for influencing people’s minds. The fact that the [calypso] tents are so sedulously supervised by the police reveals the extent to which the Calypso singers

influence political thought (Ibid )

Calypsonians could suffer litigation for angering the upper classes Freedom of speech did not apply in the colonies where any oppositional discourse was stifled (Manuel 1995) Growling Tiger was taken to court for demanding the resignation of the assistant director of education in the song "Daniel Must Go," such was the fear of the political commentary from a calypso singer (Warner 1985, 63) Lord Protector sang about the double standards of colonialism in 1920 charging that Britain has a different set of human rights for her colonies

We are ruled with the iron hand,  
Britain boasts of democracy, brotherly love, and fraternity,  
But British colonists have been ruled in perpetual misery  
(Quoted in Manuel 1995, 189)

Yellowman obviously took pleasure in being the slackest deejay, and I contend that he saw himself in a leadership role in society with the ability to use his controversial status to put forward an alternative to mainstream value system, even a Rastafarian moral view of the world The slackest deejay is the most controversial, and speaks with the loudest voice, gets the most media attention He harnessed the media attention, and the medium of dancehall he had at his disposal, to highlight the hypocrisy of the mainstream moral position He ridiculed society's sexual codes and prohibitions while at the same time played into their fascination and obsession with sex

Yellowman used slackness to satirize elite society Through slackness he contested the accepted definition of Jamaicanness Even more than his predecessors, Yellowman inverted racial and class hierarchies, subverted mainstream notions of black sexuality and

espoused a sexual ethic that had more in common with sex-positive African ideologies of the body than with the Judeo-Christian neo-platonic dualism that privileged mind and spirit over flesh<sup>150</sup> As a slackness deejay Yellowman was a tremendously successful satirist He poked fun at the grand narratives of morality such as marriage and sexual propriety as means to gain respect In many songs he espouses the benefits of the married life, only to turn around and metaphorically break his marriage vows by singing about sex with hundreds of women In Yellowman's retelling of sex and society, respect is gained through sexual activity not restraint This is in keeping with Sobo's findings that masculinity in Jamaica is based by how sexually potent a man is (Sobo 1993)

These pillars of respectability, restraint and marriage, have a stormy history in Jamaican society Marriage is a sign of respectability in Jamaica, particularly among Christians, and is given hegemonic status by the churches and government (Chevannes 2006) Yet the vast majority of Jamaicans are not married and prefer common law, or "visiting" unions,<sup>151</sup> multiple conjugal partnerships better represent the mating patterns of Afro-Caribbean peoples, particularly at the lower end of the class structure (Ibid ) This scenario troubled the European ruling classes—for whom sex outside of marriage was deemed fornication—and gave them cause to suspect that African-Caribbean people were "fundamentally savage, incapable of the nobler values of civilization except through the civilizing influence of the European's religion, education and good law" and caused the wife of one governor in the forties to launch a movement to encourage Jamaicans to marry (Ibid , 183) Chevannes has found that while marriage is still held in high esteem

---

<sup>150</sup> I will return to this in Section III Chapter 4

<sup>151</sup> 80 percent of adult Jamaicans have never been married (LaFont 2001)

by the upper classes it is practiced very little by the lower classes and the fact that multiple partnerships flourish in Jamaica “indicates a lack of cultural congruence with hegemonic values” (Ibid , 135) About half of Jamaican men, for instance, are in polygamous relationships (Chevannes 2001)

The trend against marriage in Jamaica dates back to slavery Until 1826 enslaved Africans were not allowed to legally marry Slave holders did not want them forming official family bonds as they would have been unable to sell spouses and it was not until after the end of the slave trade that economic concerns convinced elites to boost the reproduction rates of their slaves by legalizing marriage (LaFont 2001) “Jamaican slaves, however, did not take the bait, reproduction remained low and most couples never married In fact, to this day, Jamaica’s marriage rate remains one of the lowest in the world” (Ibid , paragraph 22)

As emancipation neared some Christians decided that Africans were people, not animals (implicit in the term “chattel slavery”) and had souls that needed to be saved Sexuality became a central issue in the identification of salvation—if Afro-Jamaicans contained sex within the bonds of marriage, they would not be committing the sin of fornication Christian missionaries promoted sexual restraint outside of marriage and held up marriage as the exclusive sexual relationship “The British missionaries were crucially influential in shaping the definition of sexual respectability” (Ibid , 12)<sup>152</sup>

Yellowman internalized the respectability of marriage, he has a common law marriage himself yet several of his songs refashion him as a happily traditional married

---

<sup>152</sup> I will return in Section III Chapter 3 to the issue of respectability as it applies to LaFont’s theory of creole sexuality

family man. He often sings about his wife Rosie and explicitly offers her a higher grade of respect than all other women in his songs (even while he implicitly mocks marriage by desiring other women), evident, for example, in “Galong Galong Galong” where he chats “Me only trust my wife me no trust no other woman.” He theatrically reenacts the role of the good husband—looking after the baby, helping out in the kitchen—in one of his most famous songs “Yellowman Getting Married” and announces that he will marry the woman he has impregnated

I’m getting married in the morning  
 Ding dong you hear the church bell ring  
 She have me yellow baby and I’m gonna mind it  
 So take me to the church on time

You gonna be my lawful wife  
 You gonna be my lawful wife  
 Say me fry the chicken and you boil the rice  
 —Yellowman, “Yellowman Getting Married” from *Mad Over Me*

In a later version of the song he sings about the importance of marriage and his spouse, admitting that while some people criticize marriage, for him it is a natural part of life

Say that me wife is a part of me life  
 Me wife is a part of me life  
 Say some are married and some are divorced  
 Some of dem a talk about married life too coarse  
 But tell you Yellowman de girls dem love the most  
 For when it come to mic Yellowman him can toast  
 —Yellowman, “Yellowman Getting Married” from *Mister Yellowman*

However, Yellowman also turns around and undermines the marriage project in several ways. In the above stanza he seamlessly goes from speaking of the importance of his wife to bragging about his status as a sex symbol in society. On the original version of “Married” he introduces it by asking “which on a dem a wear de ring?” The insinuation

here is that he has several girlfriends and only his wife has legal claim to him. He toys with this notion in a song from the same period called “Which One Will Wear the Ring?” but uses the phrase here to lampoon not only marriage but any woman with hopes of marrying him.

Me go a Haiti find two lady  
 A when me come back me babymother hate me  
 Man a which one a dem a wear de ring

Now that the race is over and ting  
 I tell you none a dem did get the gold ring  
 —Yellowman, “Which One Will Wear The Ring?”

In the song his babymother is angry that he has other girlfriends. He likens romance to a race where many women attempt to win a ring from him but their attempts go unrewarded as he prefers to stay single. Not only does this undermine the institution of marriage that was held up as an example of a respectful reciprocal relationship in “Yellowman Getting Married,” it also overturns any gender equality espoused in the song.

Yellowman also recorded an answer song to “Getting Married” called “Getting Divorced” and the subject matter again subverts much of the positive view of marriage found in the previous song and this time reinforces gender stereotypes more blatantly. The institution of marriage is not so much lampooned here as, somewhat ironically, Yellowman complains in the song that the sanctity of marriage was not upheld by his wife who is portrayed as a liar who never loved him. “Getting Divorced” then, actually reinforces popular gender and marriage stereotypes. Yellowman complains to sparring partner Fathead that he is tired of marriage because his wife is ruling his life, a far cry from the previous “me wife is part of me life” lyric. In direct contrast to the previous

song we learn that a woman's place is in the kitchen and her role is to be subservient to her husband and any deviation from that role can result in physical abuse. The double standard of extra-marital relationships is also invoked, Yellowman is heartbroken because his wife, he sings, has three other men. Meanwhile much of his material suggests to us that it is perfectly fine for the male partner in a marriage to have multiple outside relationships. Here we find another similarity with calypso for Calypsonians the male role is to be an unfaithful husband and absent father while expecting loyalty from his wife (Warner 1985). That the entire song is actually a farce on marriage though, is made clear in the last stanza as Yellowman relates a story about visiting an Obeahman who tells him that his wife is sleeping with fellow deejay Fathead, after which Fathead and Yellowman join together in a humorous outro for the song.

Similarly, several of his slack songs appear to satirize the sanctity of the institution of marriage by the very fact that they celebrate polygyny. For Yellowman, marriage is not a sexually exclusive arrangement. And following from this marriage is not thought of as a prerequisite to a respectable sexual union, as in the Christian tradition. Chevannes' research on matrimony in Jamaica suggests that the role of marriage in society is different than the one Christian missionaries intended. "It is not that people do not get legally married, but they understand legal marriage not as the legitimizing of sexuality, but as the bestowing of social respectability" (Chevannes 2006, 220). However, Yellowman continually ruptures the idea of the social respectability of marriage by insisting that respect and masculine credibility are better gained by extra marital sexual relations.

A similar discourse occurs regarding the placement of children in Yellowman's

songs. A self-described family man, Yellowman's songs offer two seemingly opposite readings of how society should regard children. Songs such as "Yellowman Getting Married" go against the grain of Caribbean music by espousing a paternal ethic. "She have me yellow baby and I'm gonna mind it." Next to calypsos that treat children like furniture, this demonstrates an enlightened gender politics (Warner 1985, 118). Yet in "Getting Divorced" he opts to give his wife financial support for childcare instead of physical assistance. In other songs he questions paternity claims from former lovers, telling them that if their baby is not yellow, he will not look after it. If they cannot prove he is the father, Yellowman somewhat crudely insists they do not stand to receive any more than a pittance. "Any girl who don't have no baby fe me / When they tek Yellowman money, they naw get no more a dollar fifty" (from "Life Story")

Obika Gray sees slackness as one tool in the ghetto activist's toolbox to reject dominant society's rules and regulations pertaining to entry into respectable Jamaican society. Artists such as Yellowman carved out a respectability among the poor that was set apart from high society's definition of what is upstanding. Yellowman and his ilk in the dancehall took every opportunity to announce their values to the island using the latest technology available to them from the loud speakers of nightly dancehall lawns to the dub plates and records issuing continually from the island's many studios and labels. He infiltrated public space with underclass values in a way heretofore impossible and helped to mainstream dancehall music around the world. Using Gray's theoretical framework of slackness, Yellowman's lasciviousness can also be interpreted as the politically attuned project of a social activist.

### ***Yellowman's Afrocentric Alternative***

In conjunction with Gray's work, it is helpful to briefly look at two further sites of social critique in Yellowman's music that align his slackness with an Afrocentric commentary of Eurocentrism and the European-derived value system in colonial society as well as with the anti-colonial project of the Rastafari

Morality in the English Caribbean is greatly influenced by Euro-Christian practices. Morality in Jamaica has been historically subject to Eurocentric value judgments that belittle African-derived customs and culture while espousing the superiority of European religion and morality. Dancehall musicians who indulge in slackness throw themselves into the middle of this struggle and are judged by mainstream Eurocentric society as being immoral for it. Their slackness, rather, should be viewed in terms of the struggle between the Christian-dominated value system so prevalent among mainstream Jamaica and the African-derived value system that has always existed outside that mainstream on the island, for this struggle is not new in Jamaica.

One thing is certain about West Indian society and that is the persistence of the struggle between Europe and Africa on foreign soil and the primacy of this struggle over all other considerations. The struggle has always presumed eventual success for Europe though Africa has been tolerated in the conflict. This is what our younger West Indians term Eurocentrism—the unrelenting cultural domination of West Indian people by Europe. Africa is indeed tolerated in spurts of syncretized or reinterpreted folklore—a little bit of dance, a little bit of music, a little bit of storytelling, and a few words here and there lacing the Anglo-Saxon tongue with exotic tone and colour. But everything which matters or is said to matter draws heavily on Europe. Our formal education system, our accepted belief system, our art, law and morals, the legitimate customs and so many of our habits and perceived capabilities—all indices of a so-called cultural sense—are dominated by the European heritage. (Nettleford 1974, 302-303)

The battle against this European impulse is as old as the history of Africans in the

Caribbean, as is shown in the persistence of creolized languages throughout the region as an Afro-Caribbean alternative to standard English, in the music forms that emphasize African scales, chord progressions, and the dominance of rhythm and spoken word, and in the many manifestations of black nationalism that have been created and adopted by Caribbean people. Gray's thesis dovetails nicely with Nettleford's above observation, particularly around Nettleford's treatment of Rastafari and the movement's suspicion about western values. Since its inception, Rastafari has asked fundamental questions about the relevance of western values to the Afro-Caribbean identity (Ibid). By confronting western values with African-derived values, Rastafarians have debunked the myth that everything African is worthless and everything European is superior. Rastafarians used religion to this end, "exploiting the historicity of Western Christianity and shattering the arbitrary choice of a Jewish Messiah by replacing the human God with a person of their own choice—one who is alive, looks something like them and is endowed with claims of ancestry of noble and spiritual lineage" (Ibid, 303-304).

Yellowman's continual insistence that he sees no difference in slack and culture, that he can chat both and that slackness to him is culture, are modern manifestations of this struggle that seek to overturn the prevalence of western values and publicize an African-derived body ethic. Further to this, Yellowman views the world through his understanding of himself as a Rasta, therefore his resistance against mainstream values should also be seen as part of the Rastafarian project to subvert Eurocentrism. Rastas were among the first West Indians to outwardly confront the Eurocentric myth of superiority and go so far as to establish an alternative system to it (Ibid).

In the early eighties Yellowman was among the youth who, according to

Nettleford, were in search of values to “legitimize their militancy and protest” (Ibid ) They found in Rastafarian doctrine and lifestyle a value system opposed to Europe and a framework that validated their oppositional politics Yellowman’s two weapons against a racist Eurocentric society were his self-respect and his talent He fought European values using these and espoused an Afrocentric value system, not just in his talk of sexual celebration, but in his Rastafarian songs that situate Africa and Haile Selassie as the centre of the sacred cosmos It is for these reasons that Yellowman is an example of the kind of resistance Nettleford talked about in his essay on forging a new Caribbean society “The exclusivity of values born primarily of European experience can no longer have a place in Caribbean society which talks of self-respect and self-reliance” (Ibid , 316)

### ***Maledicta and Rudeness as Political Acts of Social Critique***

Yellowman’s use of rude language can also be interpreted against the backdrop of Rastafarian verbal rituals used to contest colonial authority and values Pollard (1994), Chevannes (2006) and Slone (2003) are among the scholars who have researched how Rastafari uses language to subvert colonial authority by creating disorder in society with the intent, in some cases, of establishing a new order Chevannes likens Rastafari to Anansi, the West African trickster that shows up in Jamaican folklore Like Anansi, Rastafari presents a challenge to the social order and has a mission to bring disorder to society Rastafari does this through the use of “tricks” or antisocial behaviour For instance, by growing beards in the sixties, dreadlocks in the seventies and using ganja, Rastas purposely disrupted notions of civil appearances and behaviour As antisocial acts

of protest, they undermined society's normative values and, as such, were threatening symbols to social order (Chevannes 2006) In addition, by naming God a black African, Rastafarians subverted the colonial order and inverted the racial hierarchy, if God is black, where does that leave the whites? And by promoting Ethiopianism and repatriation, Rastas were washing their hands of the colonial and post-colonial Western world

Another "trick" is the use of language, and specifically vulgar words Dread talk, the name of Rasta-speech, has several offense "word weapons" used to assault the social order Expletives that focus on the vagina ("bomboclaat") or anus ("rasclaat"), disturb mainstream society <sup>153</sup> Slone (2003), in his study of Rastafarian maledicta, has located five topics found in the foul language and curses in dread talk religion, politics, sex, food and hair These word weapons are used to shake up polite society Peter Tosh, for instance, in an attempt to show the power of language and the ridiculousness of mainstream society's aversion to maledicta, titled a song "'Bumbo Klaat," using one of the most offensive words in Jamaica Society attaches morality to words—a language can be offensive if it connotes something immoral—but for Rastas, morality lay in actions and intentions of the mind, not in words (Chevannes 2006, 98) The intent of dread talk is to destroy the legitimacy of the Standard English and reclaim the African way of perceiving the world (Ibid ), Slone calls the aim of dread talk "decolonization" (Slone 2003, 10) Pollard agrees and argues that dread talk reflects the speaker's resistance to perceived oppression (historical/colonial and economic) and sense of

---

<sup>153</sup> Bombo is of Central African origin and means vagina, ras or raas is patois for anus and claat or klaat means cloth (Chevannes 2006, 98) Therefore bomboclaat refers to a sanitary napkin The word is often translated as the incendiary "motherfucker" (Slone 2003, 32)

potential redemption Rastas can achieve Dread talk was “stepped up” patois to be able to convey the urgent message of protest (Pollard 2000, 31)

These speech-acts are cogent political statements by political activists In the words of Count Ossie, Rastafarian musician, “we were fighting colonialism and oppression but not with gun and bayonet, but wordically, and culturally” (Count Ossie quoted in Pollard 2000, 32) Rastas resent English as the language of colonialism, the slave-owner and the oppressor Dread talk and patois are used to control the identity of the speaker, the language is more suited to their message and mindset because they have what Alleyne (1988) calls deep structural ties to Africa Instead of syncretism or a mixing of African and European culture, Jamaican language, religion and music have elements that are fully African The syntax of patois, for instance, is directly derived from, and continues to bear similarities to West African language groups Chevannes, who comments that “Jamaican culture is essentially African culture adapted to New World conditions,” estimates that Jamaican patois is 80 percent English derived and 20 percent African derived with an underlying African syntactical structure (Chevannes 1988, 138)

Yellowman, like many reggae musicians who either self-identify as Rasta or are sympathetic to the movement, continues this tradition through the employment of the same Rasta-centric symbols and language He does not smoke ganja but glorifies it in song and invites the audience to partake in it He has at times grown his hair in dreads, though more often has braided it Several of his songs support the Rastafarian interpretation of God as a living black man incarnated in the person of Haile Selassie Yellowman’s songs are Ethiopianist and repatriationist, and within them can be found multi-layered critiques of colonial western society

Yellowman's lyrics are offensive because they disturb common notions of decency, particularly in the public sphere. He has incorporated Rasta-style maledicta into his lyrics by focusing on the same five themes Stone found in dread talk and using them in a way that undermines common decency and propriety. For instance, the fact that he puts religion side by side with sex is offensive to traditional Christian dualistic thinkers, but he goes further. On *Slackness Versus Pure Culture* Chaplin, Chaplin's attempts to steer the concert away from slackness with a version of the Lord's Prayer, Yellowman thwarted his attempt by joining in and injecting the prayer with very slack lyrics. His use of offense vocabulary ridicules the otherwise reverent song.

I propose, then, that Yellowman's use of slackness and his insistence that sexual content should be free to be sung in public space, is about more than just entertaining a crowd, or "giving the people dem what they want." Yellowman intended to disrupt society and took pleasure in doing so. He promoted an alternative lifestyle, one that society deemed immoral but that he interpreted as clean and upstanding. Further to this, following Rastafarian artists like Peter Tosh and Bob Marley, Yellowman saw himself as a messenger promoting a message of happiness through sexual pleasure and fighting mainstream culture with ghetto culture. For Yellowman, society could be transformed through the breaking down of prudish Victorian attitudes toward sex and marriage.

### ***Chapter Conclusion***

In this chapter I examined how Yellowman has been constructed by the media and scholarly interpretations as the King of Slack whose musical output has most often been

interpreted as hedonistic party music lacking any political and social critique or authentic religious sentiment. Tied up in this representation is the evaluative judgment that journalists and scholars often have made where they treat dancehall as antithetical to roots reggae and ignore the possibility that slackness can carry with it social critique. I highlighted the fact that there is an established tradition of revolving between slackness and culture in reggae, and deconstructed the notion that dancehall reggae is a de-evolution of roots reggae, a lesser cultural form not to be taken seriously because of its focus on violence, materialism, sex and pleasure and seeming lack of spiritual or cultural themes. Using Obika Gray's theory that slackness offered the urban poor increased social power in their fight against racism and classism, I singled out Yellowman's slackness as an example of how slackness contested the colonial-derived "Jamaicanness" of the upper classes. In addition, I suggested that Yellowman's foul sexual language be contextualized in the Rastafarian tradition of employing curses, rude language and Afrocentric dread talk as a political protest to disturb polite society.

Ironically, at a time when critics and reggae fans were lamenting the loss of roots and culture, and condemning Yellowman as the lewd foul-mouthed digital dancehall don (equating change in technology with change in content), Yellowman was a) continuing musical traditions found extensively in roots reggae such as versioning older riddims, updating older lyrics and using the latest available technology, b) continuing a cultural discourse and maintaining many of the themes and ideologies and body/gender politics espoused by Rastafarian artists in the seventies, and c) promoting a discourse on religion and sexuality in the public sphere.

## CHAPTER 3

### Galong, Galong, Galong: Moral Regulation and the Art of Tracing

Come fe teach the truth the right naw come fe teach the wrong  
Know me as a emcee me no come fe sing no song  
David sling Goliath me say Sampson was strong  
Him did fool no hell, him was trick by a woman  
Now me give me thanks and praise to Jah the only one  
And due to Jah protection me no walk with no weapon  
But if I ever approached by a dirty Babylon  
All me do me chant Psalms 2, 3 and 21

Got to scare the hell outta all Babylon  
Now me give me thanks and praise to Jah the only one  
Now me age a 22 me age no 21  
Me ongle trust my wife me no trust no other woman  
Some woman love to tell me lie and some just love to con  
They say “a you me love” that time they love six other man

Some fly go a Germany go make nuff grand  
Outta the nasty spectacle they call prostitution  
Suck dead penis til it whole cock stand  
Don't remove them mouth until ejaculation  
Drink it down nice like a soup outta can  
All because they want a car and house and lawn

Some a them spread their legs wide from yaso to Japan  
Play with them clitoris in front of cameraman  
Dem de kind of ooman don't have ambition  
They pray for a cash more than for their reputation

Well still I'm goin change up me conversation  
Whether at me yard, at the microphone stand  
Tell you Yellowman come fe tell everyone  
So if I sound slack I don't care a damn

Ah some of them have it in their intention  
Turn them back pon Jah law, upon the Rastaman  
Ah shout out to everyone “I want to be a lesbian”  
Feel up one another with them fingers pon them hand  
Suck down below for ten minutes long  
What the hell when the bitch them mouth get jam  
The biblical days it did a gwaan a Sodom

But tell you Yellowman him know that wrong  
 Me no want me children living in no confusion  
 Call pon Jah law, you no corruption  
 You know Yellowman come fe tell everyone  
 Still me know me a go change up me conversation  
 The biggest threat to man is a the nuclear bomb  
 And who rule Russia, America, a England?  
 If me have the chance me kill them one by one  
 Between which one of them<sup>154</sup> crotch me a woulda plant atom bomb  
 Blow two seed from yaso to Taiwan  
 Me go shoot the next one<sup>155</sup> titty with a M1  
 Fill her crotch's hole with radiation  
 Pon top abuse with a pump action  
 Put de whole a dem inna old dustpan  
 And tell the truck driver  
 Galong galong galong

—Yellowman, “Galong Galong Galong”<sup>156</sup>

I now turn to an examination of one of the dominant uses of slackness in Yellowman’s material—for the purposes of moral regulation. This chapter focuses on the intersection between religion, sexuality and popular culture and argues that Yellowman uses sexually suggestive lyrics to “trace” moral shortcomings for his audience with the purpose of espousing “correct” sexual behaviour according to his ethical perspective as a Rastafarian. As a case study I will use the popular 1985 song “Galong Galong Galong”. At first glance the lyrics to this song are intolerant, sexist, homophobic, violent and irreverent, irreverent particularly because they bring together sex and religion, but also because they transgress social taboos by speaking about sex acts with obscene directness instead of double entendre.<sup>157</sup> The song, which can be translated as “get lost,”<sup>158</sup> indicts

<sup>154</sup> Later live versions of the song use “Reagan” or “Bush” here

<sup>155</sup> Later live versions use “shoot Margaret Thatcher titty with a M1” here

<sup>156</sup> From the 1985 album *Galong Galong Galong*. When referring to the song I will use quotes (“Galong Galong Galong”), when referring to the album I will use italics

<sup>157</sup> My intention is not to offer an apologetic for Yellowman’s or dancehall’s perceived or real violent and intolerant lyrics. Dancehall as a music genre is both constructed out of a culture of violence and constructs / participates in that culture of violence

practitioners of sexual tastes that are abnormal according to Jamaican values—prostitution, pornography, homosexuality and oral sex—with vitriol using biblical imagery and conservative Afro-Caribbean values I draw here on Lafont’s (2001) theory of “creolized sexualities” that describes Jamaica’s narrow definition of respectable sex—sex as a natural part of human pleasure but within the confines of Victorian respectability—as well as Saunders’s (2003) work on moral regulation in contemporary dancehall reggae When contextualized with Yellowman’s Rastafarian faith and the Jamaican practice of tracing, “Galong Galong Galong” presents us with a valuable example of the ways Caribbean artists engage in moral regulation through popular culture and offers another reading of how slackness functions in Yellowman’s material

### ***The Art of Tracing***

Moral regulation is found throughout Yellowman’s slack repertoire but the focus here is on the employment of the Caribbean art of tracing in his material in order to reinforce correct sexual ethics Tracing implies cursing or speaking abusively (Adams 1991, 63) Patrick has speculated that the term may be derived from the leather traces used to whip horses and mules and defines the word as “curse”, to trace is to “insult or argue with someone using rough language, including obscenities” (Patrick 1995, 257)

Tracing is a common discursive tactic in the English Caribbean among the lower classes (as seen in Louis Bennett’s work where tracing is often employed as part of folk

---

<sup>158</sup> Literally “go along” or “get lost” Often used imperatively, as in “get along!” (Cassidy 2002, 193) In this song there is the added meaning of “to dispose of permanently,” connoted in the reference to the garbage truck which carries away (or hides/destroys/buries/recycles into something useful) refuse

discourse) with origins in both the Ashanti verbal dispute called *kasákàsa*<sup>159</sup> and Scottish *flyting* (D’Costa 1994, Simpson 2004)<sup>160</sup> This quarrelling method was documented in Jamaica by English journalist Ned Ward in 1698 and surgeon John Atkins in 1722 and standardised into a Caribbean poetic genre in the twentieth century practiced by poets such as Louise Bennett and calypsonians (D’Costa 1994) Simpson calls it “a highly dramatic and aggressive form of public performance,” she further describes tracing as thus

The speech act is a means through which the tracer projects him/herself into the public eye and demands some form of recognition and validation for his/her position and circumstance In a successful tracing, the person who is being traced is usually not given a chance to respond, the power lies with the tracer who uses the performance to publicly shame and belittle the opponent as well as garner support from those who witness the tracing The form is therefore best described as a monologue of invective (Simpson 2004, 839)

While the above definitions focus on tracing as a form of argumentative exchange, Sobo’s research suggests that there is a component of moral regulation involved in tracing For Sobo, tracing is so called because one party “traces the shortcomings of the other or traces out a personal version of the argument,” thereby maligning their opponent (Sobo 1993, 104) Tracing is not unlike signifying—“the act of boasting, baiting, insulting, or making insinuations” (OED)—used in the African-American community, but has the added dimension of enforcing a shared value system While an American rap artist might brag about how “gangsta” they are, Yellowman will point out some social or moral transgression his opponent committed in order to bolster his own normative moral

---

<sup>159</sup> Similar to tracing is the *cuss-cuss* Derived from the Twi word *Kasakasa* and the English cuss or curse, *cuss-cuss* means name calling, to dispute, to quarrel or a row (Cassidy 2002, 265) Unlike tracing, however, *cuss-cuss* does not carry a moral imperative Notably, Yellowman covers Lloyd Robinson’s “Cuss Cuss” on *Galong Galong Galong*

<sup>160</sup> The OED describes flyting as “a kind of contest practiced by the Scottish poets of the 16th c , in which two persons assailed each other alternately with tirades of abusive verse ”

position. He often couples tracing with signification in order to bolster his moral superiority and ensure his status as King of Dancehall. Tracing assumes a communal or shared value system and by calling into question a member of the community's moral behaviour or ethical judgments, the tracer helps enforce the shared social values, thereby repairing a breach within the moral order (Sobo 1993). This can be found, for instance, in Trinidadian calypso where songs are used to draw attention to lascivious scandals in an attempt to publicly humiliate sexual misdemeanours. By parodying shameful acts calypsonians control social behaviour (McDaniel 1998). Likewise, in dancehall, and Yellowman's music in particular, tracing is used to call out immoral behaviour, humiliate those who engage in it and offer examples of correct morality.

Yellowman's traces both validate his normative moral position and gain him recognition in the community as a formidable deejay. As has been established, Yellowman spent his early life as a pariah in society due to his albinism. His utilization of the speech act of tracing should be seen against this background. As a youth Yellowman was routinely subjected to public shaming in the form of verbal traces and curses, he fought back by constructing traces and curses against his attackers using the power of his performance and position as a popular deejay to silence his critics and win over an audience.

*The Dictionary of Caribbean English Usage* defines tracing as "a loud, nasty, public quarrel between two or more persons (usually women) in which dirty references and words are freely exchanged" (Allsop 2003, 564). Noise intensity, rudeness and the public character of the argument are important here. Yellowman's use of coarse language resembles the Jamaican trace, his "dirty references" to sexual acts, for instance, both

entertain the audience and instruct them as to which deeds he believes are deviant. In this way he acts as a public voice reinforcing the moral order of society. His rudeness can also be read as a tactic to take over public space and dominate an argument. Yellowman's performance of tracing occurs in public, whether in person or pre-recorded; his music is broadcast, often very loudly, into public spaces where non-dancehall fans are forced to listen to his rudeness. Tracing is a ritual that is dependent on an audience being present; it must take place in the public sphere for it to be effective. Dancehall, with its multi-thousand watt soundsystems, is loud, public, and, to uptown society, nasty. The noise of dancehall is disruptive on its own (Cooper 2004) but combined with Yellowman's unruly mouth it was nearly impossible to contain—tapes of live dancehall sessions routinely broadcast Yellowman's rudeness out of public buses and taxis for all to hear during the period when he ruled dancehall in the early eighties. As such Yellowman uses the volume of the soundsystem, record player or radio to broadcast his side of the argument into the public sphere and assumes a "preaching to the choir" perspective whereby the songs are constructed as morality plays that pit "us" (local, black, lower class) against "them" (foreigners or uptown citizens influenced by foreign immorality).

Like the slack lyrics discussed in the previous chapters, tracing allows Yellowman to be included in the local "us"; he was initially denied blackness but here again he presents himself as a fellow black ghetto dweller. His audience, he assumes, shares his values and so they provide support and validity to the trace. Tracing is often accompanied by humour that is employed for the benefit of an audience watching or listening to the dispute. Many of Yellowman's sexual insults and *ad hominem*s are based on humour; this draws his audience in, entertains them, and creates solidarity between the tracer and

audience By tracing his opponents' moral shortcomings in a public space Yellowman uses this Jamaican discursive tradition to both police morality and establish his own normative place in society In short, he combats his outsider status by pushing others to the outside and including himself in the general populous Given the struggles of his youth this is no small feat

The trace used as a counterattack by an outsider has a parallel with another marginalized community in Jamaica Tracing as "ritualized verbal abuse" is a tactic used by male gay market higglers in Jamaica as a form of protection against a society that demonizes homosexuality (Cooper 2004, 162) Homosexuals in Jamaica are subject to verbal and physical abuse and widespread public censure because homosexuality is "perceived as a marker of difference from the sexual/culture 'norm'" (Ibid ) In a country that still has "buggery"<sup>161</sup> laws on the books, homosexuals fear for their lives One example of brutal violence against a man for being gay is the murder of the country's leading gay activist, Brian Williamson, on June 7, 2004 Williamson was a founding member of the Jamaica Forum for Lesbians, All Sexuals and Gays (J-FLAG) and was hacked to death with a machete in his Kingston home, receiving 70 stab wounds (Gayle 2006)<sup>162</sup> Another J-FLAG activist, Gareth Henry, sought refugee status in Canada after several of his friends were killed in Jamaica, one by an angry mob that chased him into the harbour<sup>163</sup>

---

<sup>161</sup> Jamaican MP Ernest Smith has recently called for the penalty for consensual homosexual intercourse to be increased to life imprisonment

<sup>162</sup> J-FLAG estimates that 10 gay people were killed because of their sexuality in 2005-2006, during the same year over 40 people were assaulted Statistics released by the group for 2007 charge that there were 48 mob attacks in which 98 individuals were attacked ([www.egale.ca/smm/docs/background.pdf](http://www.egale.ca/smm/docs/background.pdf))

<sup>163</sup> Homophobic violence in Jamaica is often tacitly sanctioned by the authorities Henry was quoted as saying, "When you find police officers who are leading mob attacks, turning up at people's home like myself, pointing guns at my window, with civilians with them, and saying that I need to leave or they're going to kill me, it reinforces homophobia" (CBC News Online 2010)

Paradoxically, there exists a socially prescribed role for homosexuals in Jamaica whereby if they are not public about their sexuality society tolerates them (Cooper 2004, Chevannes 2001, Hope 2008a) Williams (2000) suggests that acceptance is given to homosexuals in Jamaican society in return for the invisibility of their sexual practices and the absence of any political activism geared towards gay rights I watched a telecast of the state funeral of a prominent, though not openly gay, Jamaican scholar and artist that typified this paradox The gentleman's funeral was attended by dignitaries from the highest level of government, and included tributes from the Leader of the Opposition and Prime Minister Bruce Golding, who, in 2006 stated that he would not allow homosexuals in his cabinet The House of Representatives also held a special session to honour the deceased man at which two former Prime Ministers spoke Both politicians had previously made public statements that demonstrated their homophobia Edward Seaga did this with the help of two homophobic dancehall hits, "Boom Bye Bye" and "Chi Chi Man," while P J Patterson declared that Jamaica's laws against homosexuality would not be repealed under his leadership and once felt it necessary, amidst rumours of his own homosexuality, to tell his country that "my credentials as a life-long heterosexual person are impeccable" (Davis 2001)

Despite this contradiction homosexuality remains outside the Jamaican value norm and homosexual practices are routinely targeted in contemporary dancehall music Several dancehall artists such as Sizzla, Capleton, Beenie Man, Elephant Man, Bounty Killer, Cham, TOK and Buju Banton have released songs that not only condemn homosexuality but often incite violence against gays and at times call for their murder Elephant Man's "We Nuh Like Gay," for instance, includes the lyric "Battyman fi dead!

Tek dem by surprise / Queers must be killed!" In "Pump Up" Sizzla says, "Burn the men who have sex with men from behind / Shot battybwai, my big gun boom" and in "Get to Da Point" he sings "Sodomite and batty bwai me say a death fi dem"<sup>164</sup>

Given Jamaica's extreme homophobia and the threat of harassment, physical violence or death, known homosexuals are outsiders in society. As such the gay higglers mentioned above share an anathema status with Yellowman—at least Yellowman pre-fame. As society traces their moral shortcomings, so do they fight back in similar fashion. Yellowman, whom I have argued above stood outside the body politic and was denied blackness, sexuality and masculinity, used tracing as a counter-attack or even pre-emptive strike against a public that demeaned him as a youth and routinely criticized his sexual lyrics as an adult. These traces can be read as a tactic for Yellowman to gain normative status by "othering" those in society that have transgressed the established moral value system he upholds. Likewise tracing is a means for Yellowman to change his representation from that of an outsider to a celebrity by drawing on established cultural moral tropes—the evils of homosexuality, prostitution, pornography and deceptive women.

Tracing can also be used in religious discourse whereby demeaning a proscribed sexual practice can reinforce correct sexual behaviour for the community. By calling into question some aspect of an opponent's sexual practices in "Galong Galong Galong" Yellowman is able to substantiate his own claim to normative sexual behaviour and reinforce a model of proper sexual ethics under the rubric of Afro-Caribbean

---

<sup>164</sup> Battyman and batty bwai/bwai are patois for gay man (batty means buttocks). The translations of these songs that I have used are from a Stop Murder Music pamphlet downloaded from [www.egale.ca](http://www.egale.ca). The Stop Murder Music campaign in Canada has called for the cancellation of concerts, the removal of hate lyrics from music store catalogues, and denials of temporary work visas for Jamaican artists that incite violence against lesbian, gay, bisexual and trans-identified communities.

respectability and Rastafarian morality. As such many of Yellowman's songs function as traces, sometimes directed at a general audience, but often at specific politicians, Christian clergy or rival artists. As a Rastafarian, Yellowman sees himself as modelling acceptable sexual behaviour to his audience, and condemns perceived deviant behaviour as oppositional to the teachings of Rastafari—this is made clear in “Galong Galong Galong”

I have examined above (Section III Chapter 2) how Yellowman's use of “sexual maledicta” or curses can be contextualized in Rastafarian speech acts whereby Rastas attempt to disturb or disrupt society with words. In that chapter I quoted Count Ossie saying “we were fighting colonialism and oppression but not with gun and bayonet, but wordically, and culturally” (Ossie 1972) and cited Peter Tosh's song “Bumbo Klaat” as an example of the use of expletives and maledicta by Rastafarians to agitate society. While Ossie and Tosh were not referring to slackness per se, I see Yellowman's use of bawdy language as an extension of this usage—to agitate and disrupt polite society. He resented the colonial value system and language decorum and used vulgarity and slackness time and again in songs such as “Cocky Did a Hurt Me,” “Want a Virgin,” and “Wreck a Pum Pum” as a means to overthrow their influence over the public sphere.

My claim that Yellowman used sexual lyrics to reinforce a Rastafarian moral order goes against common representations of the artist both in the media and the scholarly literature—and indeed is a radical departure from how Rastafarian sexual ethics have been depicted in the scant literature available. Most scholars who have looked at Rastafarian sexual ethics have focused on the group's similarities with Christianity: patriarchal, conservative and misogynous (Austin-Broos 1987, Chevannes 1994, Cooper

2004, Lake 1998, Rowe 1980), with slackness seen as opposite to an austere Rastafarian sexual ethic. It is Stolzoff's view that slack lyrics were performed by non-Rasta artists and defied both Protestant and Rastafarian *morés*. Slack artists, he writes, "eschewed their roles as social reformers, preferring instead to give the people what they want" (Stolzoff 2000, 104). I suggest that apart from the obvious sexually conservative rhetoric in his lyrics, Yellowman's use of Rastafarian symbols in tandem with slackness point to the fact that there is space within a Rastafarian worldview for slackness and a sex-positive philosophy.<sup>165</sup> Stolzoff's understanding of the social influence of Rastafari and the trajectory of slackness in the early eighties is representative of the dominant view found in reggae histories and scholarship (see Section III Chapter 2 for details). But whereas he argues that Rastafarian reggae music functioned as a sort of moral consciousness of society in the seventies and the religion's influence waned in the music in the eighties, being replaced by slackness, violence and material concerns, I find in artists like Yellowman enough evidence to contest this cut and dried binary. Several artists that chatted slackness in the late seventies and early eighties were also aligned with Rastafari, in so far as they also chatted cultural and Rasta-centric lyrics. In addition, Yellowman's use of slackness for the purposes of moral regulation undermines Stolzoff's too tightly defined rubric of slackness. Not only does he insist that slackness is a populace agenda designed only to pander to an uncritical public, he asserts that slackness deejays do not see themselves as moral regulators, and instead are either morally neutral or amoral.

Slackness artists, most of whom are DJs, disavow being moral role models. They claim a stance of moral neutrality or a mischievous amorality, asserting that music

---

<sup>165</sup> For further discussion on Rastafarian sexual ethics see Section III Chapter 4

is only entertainment, not a medium that should carry the burden of education and social reform furthermore slackness artists do not claim the ethical high ground by talking about spiritual values Rather, they are fully committed to the hedonistic path of individualism, sexual desire, and material consumption (Stolzoff 2000, 163)

Far from this, slack artists routinely participate in social reform through the constant espousal of Afro-Jamaican sexual ethics in the face of foreign liberal sexualities that they see threatening the social fiber of the island This is hardly a morally neutral stance Yellowman is blatant about being an educator, dancehall for him is the perfect arena for education on correct sexual values, body politics and morality Stolzoff seems to deny that sexual desire and spiritual values can go hand in hand, at least as far as slackness goes Yellowman's use of overt sexual narratives side by side with praises to Jah Rastafari was the initial entry point for me into this topic Knowing something of oppositional relationship in western society between sex and religion I wondered how Yellowman could so easily put these two together In Yellowman's view singing about sex with a hundred women is perfectly in keeping with his religious morals My point is that slackness does always not represent a critique of Rastafarian sexual ethics, but often is informed by those very sexual ethics

Yellowman, routinely billed as the King of Slack, was the constant target of Jamaica's official institutions of moral regulation, namely the government and the church His music was habitually banned from airplay and his slackness became the subject of public and scholarly (Gilroy 1987, Stolzoff 2000) debates at home and abroad that credited him with the corruption of the youth and the de-evolution of reggae music as a genre Typical Yellowman songs would see him reduce women to body parts, celebrate casual sex with innumerable partners, instantiate masculinity through proof of paternity and boast about his coital talents and genital endowments

Because of this I have argued in Section III Chapter 2 that Yellowman has been constructed as the binary opposite to Bob Marley who is commonly represented as a deeply spiritual Rastafarian with a religious and political agenda to uplift oppressed peoples worldwide. When weighed against Marley, it is almost preposterous to think that Yellowman had any sort of social agenda, much less a spiritual one predicated on upholding a moral order. But Yellowman interprets his slackness using a Rastafarian worldview. He employed language considered immoral by Jamaican and international mainstream society for the very purpose of moral regulation. In other words, by singing graphically about sex and demeaning sexual practices that stand outside the narrowly confined definition of Afro-Caribbean respectability, Yellowman articulates responsible Rastafarian sexual ethics. He links LaFont's creole sexuality—a typology used to describe the sexual value system of Afro-Jamaicans—with Rastafarian sexual ethics through the crucial deployment of Rastafarian symbols and language. According to “Galong Galong Galong” we know these sexual preferences are immoral because they transgress the divine order set in place by Selassie, or God, himself. “Galong Galong Galong” then, is not only a condemnation of sexual deviance using the device of tracing, it is a sermon on what is acceptable under “Jah law.” And perhaps only in dancehall reggae could a sermon be X-rated.

I will return to an exposition of the song “Galong Galong Galong” below and show how it demonstrates my claims, but first I turn to an overview of moral regulation in dancehall and present LaFont's theory of creole sexuality.

### ***Moral Regulation in the Dancehall***

Jamaican popular culture is intolerant of liberal sexual ethics, a quick listen to any number of the slack lyrics from contemporary deejays such as Vibz Kartel, Mavado, Bounty Killer, Spragga Benz or Beenie Man will tell you this much. In response to this Saunders (2003) sees a recent trend in dancehall reggae for artists to see themselves as morality police and civil educators of proper sexual conduct, condemning any act they feel is immoral as a foreign influence. Homosexuality in Jamaica, for instance, is commonly thought of as a sexual identity that did not exist in Africa and Jamaica apart from European contact. Therefore dancehall artists that release homophobic songs are seen as moral regulators in a battle against cultural imperialism (Cooper 2004, Saunders 2003, Sharpe and Pinto 2006) <sup>166</sup>

Tafari-Ama sees the proclivity to mediate normal and taboo sexual practices as a recent addition to the themes in dancehall (Tafari-Ama 2006). Far from being a new phenomenon the practice of moral regulation by Caribbean musicians employing sexual narrative has a long history. Popular culture in the Caribbean is a crucial site where cultural values are policed and maintained, most recently it is dancehall that has taken upon itself the responsibility for keeping social order (Saunders 2003).

Yellowman's sexual ethics fit well within the parameters laid out by Suzanne LaFont in her discussion of creole sexuality—an ideology that draws on African and European body politics and treats sex as a natural part of human pleasure but within the

---

<sup>166</sup> The idea that heteronormal sexuality is prerequisite to inclusion in the nation is taken up in Alexander's study of the heteropatriarchal discourse of the nation-state in the Bahamas. Homosexuality is seen as originating outside the Caribbean and its presence there now is constructed as a contaminating influence (Alexander 1997). Discussing this ideology, Sharpe and Pinto (2006) write that "for queer-identified Caribbean people, [this] is a logic that creates a split between their sexual and their national/regional identities" (2006, 16).

confines of respectability (LaFont 2001) LaFont has looked at the recent spate of homophobia in dancehall, and songs that condemn what Jamaicans term “sodomy” any anal, oral and same-sex contact Modern sexual ethics in Jamaica, she contends, must be contextualized in that county’s history of patriarchy, colonial Christianity, and multi-asymmetry of master/slave relations, or the “multiple interrelated structures of inequalities including gender, race (as defined during the slave era), classism, and liberty” (Ibid , paragraph 25) that allowed elites to abuse slaves with almost certain impunity Intolerance to deviant sexualities began during the slave era as a complex dialectic between colonial elites and Afro-Jamaicans and has become entrenched in the moral fibre of Afro-Jamaicans

European sexual ethics in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries had a significant impact on the value systems enforced in colonial societies For Christians, sin was rooted in the body and regulated through moral discipline whereas traditional African beliefs often had a more integrated understanding of good and evil that was quite different from the dualistic relationship Christians attributed to the body and spirit (Austin-Broos 1997) For Africans sexuality was not deemed immoral, on the contrary the importance of children to society has led scholars to suggest that sexual activity in traditional African cultures was viewed as life affirming, positive, natural and pleasurable (LaFont 2001) <sup>167</sup> Conversely, for British elites of the period, sexuality was an animal instinct, to be used for procreative uses only The repression of this instinct through religion and law was of crucial importance in order to maintain a civilized society (Ibid ) England, for instance, had laws banning all non-procreative sexual practices—which were linked with sin—and

---

<sup>167</sup> We cannot know for sure what the sexual ethics of the enslaved Africans were, but Alleyne (1988) argues that it makes no sense to think that Africans were stripped of their culture

that the crime of buggery was punishable by death (Ibid ) British elites in the colonies encountered a broader range of sexual opportunity and less censure than in England The colonies became a sort of sexual playground for the male plantocracy, exemplified in Ned Wards' 1698 proclamation that Jamaica's Port Royal was the "Sodom of the Universe" (Ibid)

It is this difference in European and African sexual morés that led to the development of creole sexuality among Afro-Jamaicans as they adapted to sexual exploitation in the colonies The plantocracy, for instance, misjudged the Afro-Jamaican's sex-positive view for immorality and this resulted in a justification for their sexual exploitation of Africans and fed into developing ideologies that stereotyped blackness with hypersexuality and promiscuity (Ibid ) For their part, Afro-Jamaicans witnessed sexual exploitation and believed Europeans to be morally corrupt Dancehall's attitude of moral superiority over the west stems from this period

For Douglas (1999) the differing sexual attitudes and customs between European elites and Africans actually provided the enslaved population with the flexibility to adjust to exploitative conditions of slavery Afro-Jamaicans did not condemn extra marital sex and children born out of wedlock, for instance, and so were better equipped to cope with rape and outside children African women were not ostracized for this and the high regard placed on children in African cultures helped enslaved Africans adapt to this new reality For them the calamity was barrenness, not outside children (Ibid )

LaFont's theory of creole sexuality is predicated on the fact that enslaved Afro-Jamaicans responded to European sexual exploitation by adopting what they had to, embracing what they wanted and rejecting what they could Social mobility required

respectability so Jamaicans adopted a Victorian sexual ethic that narrowly defined acceptable sexual behaviour. But Victorian *morés* were only adopted on Jamaican terms. For instance, many Afro-Jamaicans accepted Christianity but rejected the church's teachings surrounding marriage and monogamy.

Henriques believed that Afro-Jamaicans had no trouble reconciling some non-Christian sexual behavior with their spiritual beliefs. "But the attitude towards sex is hardly that of the ordinary Protestant country. It is essentially ambivalent. The individual may often be extremely religious, yet in his sexual behavior contradict the religious teaching to which he subscribes. There is no *apparent* conflict within the individual, nor does there appear to be a sense of guilt (Emphasis in the original, Henriques 1964: 156 quoted in LaFont 2001, paragraph 56).

This sense of ambivalence regarding the extremely religious yet sexually promiscuous is apparent throughout Yellowman's material, and is shared in much of reggae and dancehall. Adherence to conservative understandings of sexual practices may be derived from Victorian Christianity but dancehall's sex positive stance is strongly rooted in African ideologies of sex and the body. Cooper (2004), for instance, offers a reading of the erotic in dancehall that takes into consideration an African model of wholeness whereby dancehall reclaims the positive body-image and sexuality of African spirituality. She contextualizes such a reading in Jamaican religious history using the Afro-Jamaican religion *Convience*. *Convience* songs documented in the fifties cite the spiritual power of the *pum-pum* or vagina. Cooper suggests that this illustrates that modern cultural forms in the African diaspora like have kept an African view of sexuality. It is not hard to see how dancehall, with its celebrations of the body and sexuality, is an extension of this ideology and how Yellowman, with his dual deployment of sexuality and spirituality, is conceivably influenced by this African model.

***Come Fe Teach the Truth: Yellowman as Moral Regulator***

To bring Yellowman back into this discussion, then, I suggest that Yellowman's slackness is an example of creole sexuality—a belief in freedom of sexual expression but within the parameters of Victorian respectability—and that his sex positive worldview is derived from an African view of sexuality. Rather than simply singing about sex for entertainment, however, Yellowman's slackness is designed to teach his audience a lesson about sexuality. Yellowman's 1985 album *Galong Galong Galong* is instructive when looking at dancehall and moral regulation. The album revolves between blatant slack songs and songs that express moral concerns such as proper sexual behaviour, the place of slackness in society and body politics. For instance, "Beat It" was written in response to critics who saw in Yellowman's braids a parallel to gender-bending eighties pop star Boy George. Perceiving this as an attack on his masculinity, Yellowman took aim at two of pop music's effeminate stars, Boy George and Michael Jackson, with the purpose of establishing his own masculinity and condemning cosmetic surgery and transgender fashion statements. Jackson's face, Yellowman chats, is not "normal" and he insinuates that the surgeries have caused Jackson to "favour ooman" (look like a woman). The song ensures us, as if we did not already know from the plethora of Yellowman albums that make the point, that many women think Yellowman is sexy, in this case the reason is that he can dance like Michael Jackson, though does not look like him. The track here ensures that Yellowman is presented as the normative masculine role model at the expense of Jackson's and George's questionable gender and sexuality.

"Blow Saxophone," another track off the album, is a graphic slackness song that depicts oral sex as sinful. Yellowman's job, he tells us, is to "get you on the level," or set

you straight (pun intended) In true slackness style, Yellowman describes for his audience sexual behaviour that is respectable and then enforces societal taboos

Me sex pon bed, upon the table  
 Me kiss you pon your lip, kiss you pon your chin  
 Feel up your breast and nuff caress  
 But me naw pass the navel, me naw pass the navel  
 —Yellowman, “Blow Saxophone”

Kissing below the navel—referring to cunnilingus—is not part of his bedroom repertoire and he is instructing his audience to follow suit In the song Yellowman links sexual deviancy with transgressing religious law When you bend down to give oral sex, you are “Giving your prayers all to the devil ” Using the analogy of a two or three-legged table for men and women, he tells us “You no fe eat under two foot table / When you under the table you deal with the devil,” and reiterates “Yellowman going get you all upon the level ” “Level” here could be read to insinuate “straight,” as in respectable heterosexual behaviour, and also “horizontal,” referring to one of the standard heterosexual coital positions

But perhaps nowhere in his vast catalogue of songs is slackness and moral regulation so neatly laid out as in the popular “Galong Galong Galong ”<sup>168</sup> The song was first released in 1985 and was a perennial staple of Yellowman’s live shows He omitted the song from concerts during the late eighties while in England due to its anti-Thatcher content—he says that he was asked to do this by promoters so as not to draw the attention of the authorities These days, according to his manager and keyboardist Simeon Stewart, the song only occasionally makes it onto the set list at Yellowman’s behest The lyric is delivered at lightning speed and in heavy patois making it difficult for foreign audiences

---

<sup>168</sup> The song was produced by George Phang using the “Rockfort Rock” riddim played by Sly and Robbie

to catch the words and many, no doubt, have missed the homophobia, masochism, sexism, and violence included in the song. It remains, however, a prime example of Rastafarian and Afro-Jamaican sexual ethics packaged in a popular culture art form with the intention of reiterating a strict ethical Jamaican code over and against immoral foreign influences.

The song uses traces about sexual deviancy to police the behaviour of not only homosexuals, prostitutes and pornographers but also the political leaders of Britain and the United States. The lyric is framed by its introductory statement: "Come fe teach the truth the right, naw come fe teach the wrong." Yellowman establishes himself as a moral educator that has a claim to truth and knowledge. He continues the chat by stating biblical truths: David slew Goliath, Sampson was strong. The use of the Bible underscores his claim to religious or revealed truth. That he is speaking on behalf of, or from the position of, Rastafari is made clear a few stanzas later through the invocation of Jah ("Now me give me thanks and praise to Jah the only one / And due to Jah protection me no walk with no weapon"). It is clear that the values he is about to espouse are understood as religiously prescribed. He also likens the sexual freedoms of the west to the wickedness of Sodom and Gomorrah, furthering the understanding that Yellowman positions himself on privileged moral ground as he condemns the sexualities of others.

His sense of divine protection and righteousness is bolstered by the power of the spoken word and the Bible: "If I ever approached by a dirty Babylon / All me do me chant Psalms 2, 3 and 21." Here "Babylon" is meant as anyone who contravenes Rastafarian authority, the term at times—and this could be one of them—also refers to the police. When the Bible shows up in Yellowman's writing it is a symbol for roots and

culture (“Natty trod into the jungles of Africa / He open the Bible so he read up a chapter / Started to chant up the roots and culture / Tell it to the brothers and he tell it to the sister” from (“Natty Sat Upon A Rock”) or this lyric from “This Old Man” “Me under me roots and plus me culture / Open the Bible me read up the scripture”) Rastafarians engage with the Christian Bible outside of the Christian tradition (Erskine 2005) Likewise, when Yellowman draws on scripture, he is not doing so to invoke Christianity but very often the opposite—to censure it “Fools go to Church on Sunday,” for instance, charges the Christian preacher with greed, theft, materialism, false prophecy and even adultery yet contrasts this portrayal of Christianity with a more wholesome image of Rastafari based on meditations on the Bible, Zion, Africa, Jah and the community For Yellowman then, the use of the Bible gives him moral authority outside of Christianity—derived through his mobilization of Rastafarian symbols—to pronounce judgments via the traces in the song

In addition to using Biblical authority, he cites “Jah law” without ever detailing what this is The evildoers in the song have turned their backs on divine law and upon the Rastaman—perhaps meaning Jah or Selassie himself (whose pre-throne title and name was Ras Tafari)—but also the values of Rastafari in general In the song he calls upon Jah law to admonish corruption, and clarify what is morally correct and incorrect

“Galong Galong Galong” contains three main traces chastising women, homosexuals and foreign superpowers Each is directed at generic archetypes—Babylon, personal critics, the church, western politicians, women, homosexuals, sodomites—yet they all function as moral guides for the listener and contain direct advice on proper sexual conduct

**Trace 1: The Cunning Woman**

The first trace in the song is directed at women, presumably women in general except Rosie, Yellowman's wife. This trace portrays the feminine as subservient and can be read as demonizing female sexual agency. The portrayal of women here is not novel in Jamaican culture and is in keeping with standard depictions of the feminine throughout calypso, mento, reggae and dancehall. Chevannes points to three common Old Testament archetypes for women in Jamaica: Eve, Jezebel and Delilah. Each archetype depicts female nature as deceitful and together they are mainstays of Jamaican proverbs and popular music (Chevannes 1994). Further to this, Rastafari has adopted a narrow interpretation of femininity based on a select reading of the Bible. Adam, a passive victim, was seduced and led into sin by a woman. Commonly portrayed as whores of Babylon, women in the Rastafarian worldview are "intrinsically evil" (Burton 1997, 136, Cooper 1995, 127). The sexism found in Jamaican society, Burton argues, was given a measure of justification through Rastafari's mobilization of biblical gender stereotypes among reggae artists (Burton 1997). Austin-Broos likens Rastafarian sexual regulations to Jamaican Pentecostals in that both sought the subordination of women: both shared "a strong male imperative not simply to control sexuality but to control the sexuality of women associated with the movement" (Austin-Broos 1997, 193). Rastafarian views of women extend to control over their bodies. Menstrual taboos, clothing restrictions and double standards about male/female monogamy in Rastafari are all examples of a Christian-derived understanding of the frailty of the flesh, as they are based on the view of women as entrappers, trying to get the Rastaman to stray from his righteous ways (Cooper 2004).

Most female characters in Yellowman's songs, save his wife, are closely drawn from these archetypes, the cunning female who is only interested in his money is ridiculed in song after song. For instance, in "It's Me," Yellowman describes a woman who thinks he is ugly until she sees his wad of cash. She then changes her mind and decides he is sexy. Women in his songs are always up to no good, and attempt to scurrilously control men. Yellowman's "Nuh Tie Me" reproduces the rural Jamaican belief that a menstruating woman can "tie" her man, or bind him to her exclusively, by adding some of her menstrual blood to the food he eats.<sup>169</sup>

The trace against women in "Galong Galong Galong" is quick to betray a typical Jamaican patriarchal agenda by slighting the feminine in order to enhance the masculine. Sampson was strong but fell victim to the wily ways of his wife, women are not to be trusted because they lie and sleep around, have no ambition or engage in sexual acts for profit. The double standard of monogamous woman/polygynous man reinforces typical Jamaican gender roles and sexual ethics. Yellowman brackets his wife from much of his criticism though. In a society where men give the greatest respect on their mothers, Yellowman's motherless status may account for the fact his wife is the sole female recipient of respect in his songs.

### ***Trace 2: The Irreligious Sodomite***

The second sexual deviation traced in "Galong Galong Galong" is homosexuality, especially lesbianism. It is not enough for Yellowman to merely name a sexual transgression, he uses slack lyrics to describe in detail the sexual maneuvers of lesbians.

---

<sup>169</sup> For a discussion of this belief and menstrual taboos see Sobo 1993, 229-33

He knows this will titillate and entertain his audience, even though (or perhaps because) the acts he is describing are taboo. He addresses his own use of slackness here, saying “if I sound slack I don’t care a damn”—the use of lascivious lyrics serve to heighten the effect of the song. His ability to trace in detail ethical wrongs make him all the more qualified to condemn them. There is a parallel here with Foucault’s thesis on sexual discourse in the Victorian era. Even though this period is often characterized as sexually repressed, says Foucault, there was an explosion of discourse about sexuality and an obsession with sex, predominantly by those “qualified” to condemn it, such as the medical, legal and clerical professions (Foucault 1990).

Tellingly, the song includes a special indictment of public homosexuality. Yellowman is offended when women “shout out to everyone ‘I want to be a lesbian’”—and presumably the “don’t ask, don’t tell” rule would serve them well here. What differs from female heterosexual and homosexual transgressions is that the latter invite divine retribution, alluded to in the reference to Sodom, which was destroyed by the Hebrew God because of its sexual impurity (Jude 1-7). The former only results in a tainted reputation among men. Lesbians, we learn, turn their backs on Jah. Presumably this is why they invite divine punishment.

Male homosexuality has also been employed by Yellowman as the fodder for a trace. One famous example is an early eighties live deejay clash with Nicodemus, one of the island’s top deejays at the time. At stage shows and on record Yellowman’s traces are one-sided and the subjects of the trace have no chance to respond but during his early career he spent most nights of the week deejaying on soundsystems alongside other deejays. Due to his controversial status as a dundus, he was often goaded into tracing

performances to fend off traces by rival deejays. The clash with Nicodemus occurred at Skateland between Jack Ruby's Hi-Fi, from Ocho Rios, and Black Scorpio. Nicodemus was Ruby's star deejay and Jack Scorpio hoped that his top deejays at the time, Yellowman—already a formidable force on the scene—and Sassafras, could lead his sound to victory, an achievement that is determined solely by crowd response. As such, each deejay's job was to win over the crowd. The quickest way to do this is to trace some moral transgression of the opponent for the delight of the audience, being sure to include entertaining devices such as humour, clever wordplay, rhyme and steady rhythm.

During the set Nicodemus attempted to scurrilously discredit Yellowman by calling into question his talent, saying the only reason Yellowman was famous was because of his colour—his albinism used as a gimmick. Nicodemus also used the pejorative “bwoy,” bringing into question Yellowman's masculinity. Allegations of gimmickry and talentlessness plagued Yellowman during his early career, often by rival deejays attempting to discredit him by tracing his own social transgressions.

Defending his talent/honour was a routine practice for Yellowman in those early days, whether it was contending with deejays who refused to pass him the microphone or his insistence on the 1982 tribute to Barry G's radio show, “Two to Six Supermix,” that his popularity was based on lyrical prowess. “No gimmicks, gimmicks, just lyrics, lyrics make dis a one sound so sweet.” “Society Party” and “Mr Big Shot,” both off *Two Giants Clash*, go further in confirming Yellowman's place in society as a respectable upstanding citizen which in itself establishes Yellowman's right to fame and talent. By claiming respectability and natural talent he nullifies charges that he became famous by some fluke. Both songs offer humorous narratives about Yellowman's acceptance into high

society, the latter by announcing that when the Queen came to visit, Yellowman's was the first hand she wanted to shake. Albinos were supposedly void of talent and standard social conduct dictated that they remain in subservient social positions. Yellowman not only breached these social borders, he continually reminded his audience of it and Nicodemus attempted to use this fact to his advantage at the Skateland clash, hoping to win the adoration of the audience for calling out Yellowman's offense against the social order. Expecting crowd approval, Nicodemus was surprised to be the victim of a trace himself. All Yellowman had to do in order to defeat Nicodemus was to find a more serious taboo than albinism.

In homosexuality Yellowman found the transgression that aggravated society even more than albinism. Both the dundus and the homosexual are freaks of nature according to Jamaican constructions of the body and sexuality as heteronormative, the dundus because their phenotype appears to breach racialized understandings of body aesthetics and the homosexual because of their proclivity for non-procreative sexual behaviour. The severe homophobia in Jamaica, however, made traces against homosexuality a safe bet for any deejay intent on disparaging an opponent. All Yellowman had to do was call into question the rival deejay's heterosexuality in a way that would make the crowd laugh. "I'm a dundus bwoy but me no go a Ochi where there a whole heap a batty men and them ting there"<sup>170</sup> By mentioning to the crowd that Nicodemus was from Ocho Rios, a known tourist haven, the crowd understood Yellowman was linking liberal sexual practices to the tourism industry—a known pairing in Jamaica—and hence to liberal non-Jamaican sexual ethics. Jack Scorpio recalls that Yellowman's trace that night "kill the great

---

<sup>170</sup> This quote is Yellowman remembering what he said at that show. I have been unable to locate a tape of the actual show and depended on Jack Scorpio and Yellowman for details of the events.

Nicodemus ”

Jack Scorpio One of the biggest dance I keep at Skateland, I never forget when [Yellowman] killed Nicodemus That's how me know say that youth coming strong like me you know that's how him mek him name, one of the biggest dance whe him really now take over the big time [It was] the biggest discrimination inna at Skateland where actually at least about 5 or 6000 people in dat, rammed Black Scorpio and the sound dem call name Jack Ruby Never forget, Nicodemus upon Jack Ruby and Yellowman and Sassafrass upon Scorpio

Brent Hagerman Who was discriminating against Yellowman?

JS Nicodemus

BH What did he say?

JS Dundus bwoy and wan one ray ray ray<sup>171</sup> I never forget how he, Yellowman, just sit down upon me sound I say to Yellowman, “Yellowman you me brother, you wait likkle one” When my time come and Yellowman time come, Yellowman took up the mic you know and say, “Yes me a dundus you know But me no come from Ochi [laughs] Let me tell you dat—when Yellowman talk nuff forward inna dance, don Kill Nicodemus, the great Nicodemus from deso For Nicodemus was the hardest deejay in Jamaica at that time

B So he was the biggest deejay?

J The biggest deejay (Johnson 2009)

The comedic insinuation that Nicodemus associated with homosexuals was enough for Yellowman to defeat him in the crowd's eyes and it importantly strengthened Yellowman's own masculinity and heterosexual credentials By “tracing” Nicodemus's alleged social transgression, Yellowman participated in representing the sexual morés of the masses and provided evidence that he was one of them This functioned to both include the outcast albino in the body politic, as well as regulate moral behaviour for the audience present, after the roasting Nicodemus suffered it is doubtful any audience member would want to be seen as gay or even tolerate a publicly gay acquaintance

---

<sup>171</sup> Ray ray “and so on and so forth” (Williams 2008, 95)

Using sexual deviancy in a trace is a common argumentative tactic in Jamaica. Sexuality, with its link to morality and personhood, is a relatively easy target that can score a subject quick points among onlookers, or, as Jack Scorpio puts it in dancehall terminology, “nuff forward inna dance.” To call into question one’s sexuality immediately ostracizes them in public by revealing intimate details—whether true, perceived or even ridiculous—about their life. The importance of sexuality as an identity marker in western society means that sexuality is far more than simply biological fact and pleasurable activity. Rather, it is “the central part of our being, the privileged site in which the truth of ourselves is to be found” (Weeks 1989, 6). Sexuality is a mechanism by which distinctions and groupings can be made (Douglas 1999). To question or challenge a group’s sexuality reinforces one’s own superiority. And if one can establish that a person’s sexual behaviour is improper then one can also suggest that person is inferior. An attack on a person’s sexuality is significant because it implies their very humanity (Ibid). It is not hard to see sexual insults as rooted in the colonial practices of sexual exploitation against Afro-Jamaicans as a mechanism to maintain power. As I have mentioned above (Section III Chapter 1), drawing on Douglas (1999), LaFont (2001) and Stoler (2002), European colonials used sexual categories and rules of carnal engagement for the purposes of controlling the subservient, non-European populations in the colonies. As such, when Yellowman uses sexuality as a means of social control in his traces he is harkening back to the sexual politics of the colonial era and demonstrating the lessons and tactics internalized by the Afro-Jamaican population.

As a youth Yellowman learned what correct sexual behaviour entailed through these sorts of public traces. He was introduced to tracing as a discursive tactic to enforce

moral regulations as a child and learned what sorts of sexual behaviour is tolerated and how to use sexual deviancy to minimize a threatening contender. He remembers listening to coarse jokes and public arguments as a boy where a contender might chide an opponent by questioning their sexual respectability in order to turn the crowd in his favour.

Yellowman “In Jamaica, when you hear a argument occurring, the seriousness come in when you tell the guy about his mother, like ‘suck your mother’ or ‘you is a batty man,’ or ‘you suck pussy’”<sup>172</sup>

According to Yellowman’s example above, even more so than statements about an opponent’s mother, statements concerning sexual deviancy (including incest), are the most harmful in an argument or trace. So by insinuating that Nicodemus was a “batty man,” Yellowman employed the most serious discursive means of social control available.

These sorts of traces are found in arguments, jokes, songs and even graffiti. If a deejay’s set is not going particularly well, a sure-fire way to rally the crowd is to garner solidarity around an anti-gay lyric. I witnessed this at a 2007 Buju Banton concert in London, Ontario when a deejay spinning records to a restless crowd in advance of Banton’s set peppered the gaps in the music with interjections asking first for all who loved their mothers to raise their hands followed by the request that all who hated batty men do the same. The action is an attempt to solidify solidarity among a fickle crowd and win support for an entertainer by playing into the crowd’s moral code—everyone loves their mother and “everyone” hates gays.

This tactic for social cohesion is common in dancehall. In Yellowman’s song

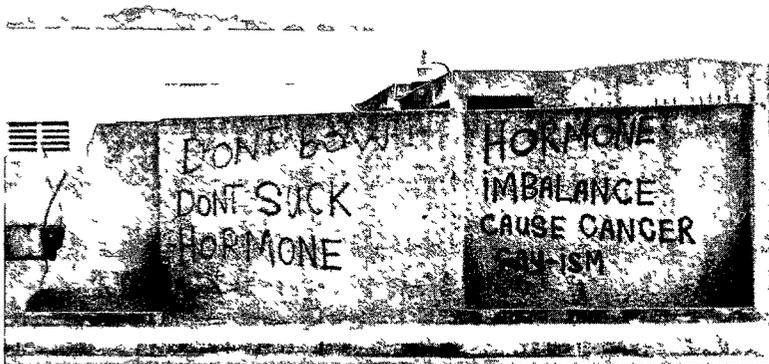
---

<sup>172</sup> Hodge corroborates this and says that due to Caribbean males’ tremendous respect for their mothers the worst insult is to curse a man’s mother (Hodge 1974, 117)

“Care Your Body,” he invites his audience to share his opinion that skin bleaching is unnatural and therefore undesirable. Singing about popular bleaching cream Ambi, he seeks to garner public support by chatting

Kick out your foot if you no use Ambi  
 And jump around you no use Ambi  
 Shout it out you have a healthy body  
 —Yellowman “Care Your Body”

In 2008, several examples of anti-gay graffiti caught my eye in Kingston, particularly near the Papine area where I attended a conference at the Mona campus of the University of the West Indies. Graffiti sprayed onto grey concrete walls and at bus stops read “Don’t bow / don’t suck / hormone” and “Hormone imbalance cause cancer / gay-ism.” This type of public art is the sort of impromptu educational tool that instructs society in proper sexual conduct and, again, employs sexual misdeeds to ostracize and police deviants. The directive against bowing or sucking refers to oral sex.



Graffiti on roadside wall in Kingston, February 2008. Photo by author.

Yellowman internalized the lessons of his youth and absorbed the moral tenor of his culture to become, like many reggae artists, the moral consciousness of society,

teaching right from wrong through traces and sexual insults. A salient example of this occurred in the early nineties in California. Some of Yellowman's anti-gay jokes sparked a controversy that ended in at least one of his shows being picketed by gay rights protestors. The incident was generated by a column called "One World Beat," in San Francisco's *BAM (Bay Area Music)* magazine by DJ Jack Daw. Daw was responding to homophobic comments Yellowman made at a show he attended and called on promoters and concert goers to boycott Yellowman in the future. He wrote about the incident on his blog:

So, Yellowman came to town and for some reason I went to see him. Tickets were free and I usually got drinks as well, so why not? But I had no great regard for him to start with, although a couple of his 12" singles had appealed to me over the years. I forget which venue it was at, but it was a fairly large one, and there was a reasonably diverse audience. Someway into his set, which was otherwise fairly unremarkable, he launched into a vicious toast against lesbians and gays, which went pretty much like this: "If you see a lesbian in the street, fuck her. If you see a faggot, kill him." I was completely and utterly stunned and so were many, but not all, in the audience. This was San Francisco in the early nineties and it was not acceptable to incite street violence against gays or rape of lesbians—and still isn't, no way no how nowhere. However, it must be said that there was a certain amount of homophobic sentiment in the Jamaican and reggae community (Daw 2008).

Daw goes on in his blog to say that the next time Yellowman toured the American west coast he did not get booked in San Francisco. The closest show was in Santa Cruz, about 70 miles south of the Bay area, "and famous for being even more radically activist in a hippyish way than San Francisco" (Ibid.)

About a week before the gig, I got a call from someone down there telling me that, because of my column, they were going to organize a boycott and have a picket line. I hadn't often felt that good about the results of anything I'd written. After the show, I called my contact and was told that the show had been poorly attended, but the somewhat amazing thing to me was that Yellowman had invited the protestors backstage and had apparently been completely bewildered by the whole thing. He'd claimed that he had meant no offense and that what he said was just intended as "entertainment"! (Ibid.)

There were other incidents of activism against Yellowman for homophobia. In a blog response to Daw, Papa M recalls a concert in England where Yellowman repeated the incendiary anti-gay comments:

I DJ'd at a Yillo-mahn [sic] concert at The Zap Club in Brighton (gay capital of UK). He sang the same lyrics here and the lighting engineer (gay) slammed the power off and refused to put it back on. The show was abandoned. It was hilarious. (Papa M 2008)

Daw later makes a point several commentators share, that it is odd that Yellowman would direct incendiary comments at one minority group when he, as a visible minority, has suffered greatly at the hands of mainstream Jamaican racial prejudice. Under the rubric of the trace, however, this is not a paradox. Yellowman was the victim of cussing and tracing because of his colour; he fought back using the traces against moral transgressions he deemed far more serious, such as homosexuality. Yellowman would not liken homosexual prejudice to the racial prejudice he suffered because of the parameters of respectable morality—he feels that he never breached these boundaries whereas gays have. While he may admit that albinos and homosexuals both share or shared public estrangement in Jamaica, that is where the similarities end, as his moral respectability trumps anything that would separate him from the Jamaican majority. By continually referencing respectable creole sexual *morés* in his songs and performances, Yellowman firmly establishes himself as part of the majority (though not mainstream), wiping away his former minority status. Thus, the discrimination he suffered was unwarranted, but the tracing he delivers about gays is, in his view, deserved.

Unlike many contemporary dancehall artists, Yellowman has largely avoided controversy over homophobic lyrics, probably because he has toned down most

homophobic sentiments since the early nineties. In fact, he rarely performs “Galong Galong Galong” anymore. In addition, he espouses a “live and let live” philosophy in interviews and in concert and based on reading online Youtube and blog posts, and talking to and observing members of his audience, I believe that this is something many fans have come to see as exemplifying his total worldview. He makes public displays of embracing multiculturalism, often saying that all religions are equal, and everyone worships the same God with different names. Most of his concerts that I witnessed ended with a homily comprised of what Stephen Prothero (1996) might call “religious liberalism”<sup>173</sup>

Let me hear you say freedom, freedom, freedom And remember, no racism, no discrimination One love, one heart, one destiny, Jah Rastafari And remember, I want you to love each other and be good to each other and be nice to each other And if you can't be good, you can't be nice, you can't be careful, you on your own (Mash10sounds 2007)

Many of his songs, both old and new, espouse this general tolerant agenda and offer further proof of a religious liberal worldview. I'm thinking here of “God Alone,” “One God,” and “Prayer” specifically. For Yellowman this sentiment can be seen in a slight change of lyric, beginning around 1983, where he moves from speaking exclusively of Jah, the Rastafarian word for God, to describing the divine as simply God. It is also characterized by a coming to terms with his Catholic upbringing and so that, even though he is a non-practicing Catholic, he still feels an affiliation to the Catholic faith. In fact, he now considers himself a “Catholic Rasta.”

Aware that he has an international following, including many gay fans,

---

<sup>173</sup> Prothero uses this term to describe the sentiment that all religions are true, the sort of mandatory tolerance espoused by Theosophists and Gandhi. However, it is this attribute of “religious liberalism” that Prothero views with suspicion. Religious liberals, he writes, share a goal with religious conservatives: they both hope “in the end to homogenize the world” (Prothero 1996, x).

Yellowman has also taken the unorthodox step (for a dancehall artist, at least) to publicly condemn homophobic lyrics and welcome the support of his gay fans. I do not point this out to somehow downplay, minimize, or offer an apologetic for his earlier displays of homophobia, or even to present Yellowman as a changed man. On the contrary, gay jokes are still part of his conversation and he still believes that homosexuality is unnatural.<sup>174</sup> I suggest that by using the art of tracing as a theoretical frame, we can better understand the nuances of Yellowman's position on homosexuality. Tracing is not dependent on a truthful or even logical argument. The winner of the argument is the person who stands up for moral correctness. As such, in "Galong Galong Galong," as in the example of statements made from the stage in San Francisco, Yellowman used anti-gay statements for the purposes of moral regulation and entertainment but did not necessarily direct them at or see them connected to actual persons. Such traces allow Yellowman to defend a strict sexually conservative ethic—and garner support from his home base—but, in his mind at least, may have no implications for actual gay people. This is in keeping with the paradox that some Jamaicans can protest against homosexuality, while easily accepting that friends or acquaintances are gay as long as they are closeted. Yellowman instructs his manager, for instance, to respond in kind to email from gay fans and enjoys the fact that he has gay fans but this does not mean that he has permanently shelved songs like "Galong Galong Galong." Anti-gay traces, like traces against oral sex, are more about the perception of moral superiority than any moral truth. This is how Yellowman can espouse a live and let live religious liberalism and trace the wrongdoings of others at the same time. For Yellowman tracing is more about establishing for himself normative

---

<sup>174</sup> While onstage at B B King's Blues Club in New York in 2009, for instance, Yellowman made a joke alluding to San Francisco being more open to homosexuality than New York.

social status—meaning heterosexual, masculine, black—and claiming a superior moral consciousness in a society that routinely demeaned him for his lack of sexuality, race and masculinity and portrayed him as public enemy number one for his anti-social slackness. Due to the value western societies place on sexuality as an identity marker, he can get away with changing his representation by simply focusing on his sexuality in his songs.

### ***Trace 3: Foreign Superpowers***

“Galong Galong Galong” can be read as an extended sermon on the dangers of liberal western sexual ethics in an attempt to shore up local values and undermine foreign influence over morality in Jamaica. Saunders, in her reading of Buju Banton’s “Boom Bye-Bye,”<sup>175</sup> says that Banton’s refusal to apologize for the homophobic content of the song,

sent a loud signal to Jamaicans at “home” (in Jamaica) and in the United States that, despite the power of American markets to make or break imported products and even entire markets, dancehall music would reflect Jamaican sentiments and culture, no matter where it travelled (Saunders 2003, 96)

Later, when Banton converted to Rastafari, his music maintained the “anti-Western, anticolonial, and antigay sentiments” but were now veiled in “ethical, moral and religious discourses” (Ibid). Many scholars have located slackness as a multivalent site in dancehall that at once has the ability to contest mainstream values and promote home grown sentiments (Cooper 2004, Hope 2006, LaFont 2001, Saunders 2003). Artists such as Banton and Yellowman have used slackness in their religious discourses to fight off foreign immorality and promote what they understand to be correct, upstanding, moral,

---

<sup>175</sup> Also written as “Boom By-By”

Jamaican, and Rastafarian values. In this way they critique the liberal value system of the foreign influenced elite classes at home in favour of Afrocentric creole sexuality and draw boundaries for their listeners around what correct behaviour entails.

By espousing Afro-Jamaican *morés* and condemning liberal sexual ethics, “Galong Galong Galong” is an example of dancehall resisting the neo-colonial project of the west to infiltrate Jamaica with liberal sexual ethics, as Saunders (2003) describes in the case of Banton. Likening the west to Sodom and Gomorrah, Yellowman draws on sexual maledicta to show disdain for Reagan, George Bush Sr, and Thatcher. He conveys his contempt for the nuclear arms race by verbally attacking the bodies of each leader. Yellowman’s slackness routinely sets apart the sexual organs as that which is representative of morality so by focusing his trace on the sexualized bodies of international leaders Yellowman directly calls into question their morality and establishes a binary between superior Jamaicanness and inferior foreign moral deviancy. Just as sexual deviancy is the most consequential type of trace, a trace involving an attack on sexual organs is designed to show the graveness of the subject matter.

The violent imagery in this section of the song is powerful. “Between Reagan crotch me a woulda plant atom bomb / Blow him two seed from yaso to Taiwan / Me go shoot Margaret Thatcher titty with a M1 / Fill her crotch’s hole with radiation.” But actually blowing up the American President’s testicles and radiating the British Prime Minister’s genitalia is not the singer’s intent. The inclusion of sexual maledicta functions to make the trace carry more weight. As such it is far more grievous to attack sexual body parts than, for instance, an arm or leg. In the studio version of the song the moral imposition is not clearly sexual, however, the leaders are not indicted for any sexual-

ethical slippage, but for their role in propagating the nuclear arms race Unlike the other traces in the song, this one does not offer sexual-moral instruction but rather employs slackness and the sexualized body as a means to mete out punishment But in a live version of the song recorded with Charlie Chaplin in 1987, Yellowman includes “Galong Galong Galong” in a medley with “Jah Me Fear” and it is here that he targets the leaders’ sexual deviancy alongside their nuclear proclivities He prefaces the medley by situating the song’s message as anti-apartheid and tells the audience it is a cultural song<sup>176</sup> When Chaplin enters with a lyric about how he fears Jah but not the police, Yellowman steers the song toward apartheid, accusing the governments of Jamaica, America and Britain of letting oppression of black people in South Africa continue Yellowman uses a trace that seeks to embarrass the world leaders by drawing on their physical appearance, their sexual preferences and ethics, and even their hygiene

Margie a Jezebel, Reagan talk like queer  
 Him favour donkey, she favour mirror  
 A one dirty drawers<sup>177</sup> Margie Thatcher love wear  
 Reagan act like him young but him have grey hair  
 — Yellowman, “Jah Me Fear”

While these insults have absolutely nothing to do with apartheid, they function in the song as a way to entertain the audience by injecting humour into a political rant and implicitly decry western liberal sexual ethics while buttressing Jamaican values By focusing on the sexualized body—whether it be punishments meted out against it, flawed characteristics about it or moral impasses committed by it—Yellowman’s traces are made more accusatory, bring greater public reception and foster his own double agenda of

---

<sup>176</sup> In a later live recording (*Live in Paris*) he includes the lyric “freedom for the people in south Africa” in the “Galong” medley The song is listed as “Freedom” on the track listing

<sup>177</sup> Underwear

moral regulation and normative self-status. It was his body, after all, that society targeted as his penultimate malefaction and as such it is the bodies of others and/or their sexuality that he verbally abuses and publicly ridicules when he wants to stress the gravity of the situation.

This is exactly what he did when he felt libeled by a prominent Jamaican Christian leader and slackness critic. Pastor Blair, a minister and broadcaster, is one of the many voices who have publicly decried Yellowman and slack reggae. Dancehall generates widespread public criticism on the island and the discourse on slackness plays out in street conversations, on radio shows, television stations, newspaper columns, letters to the editor, academic publications and from church lecterns.<sup>178</sup> Yellowman's traces against the government, the church and non-Jamaican sexualities are not fully understood if not read in this context, he enacts this verbal ritual as part of a larger public discourse on morality, a discourse that involves several parties projecting their idea of correct morality into the public domain. Competition for public space, and for the authoritative definition of Jamaicanness, is a driving factor behind his songs. In our conversations he often talked about how average Jamaicans regardless of class, race or religion, have always accepted him but the institutions that regulate morality in society—the church and the government—discriminate against him for slackness.<sup>179</sup> It is the feeling of being under siege by the authorities that often sparks traces in Yellowman's music where the body and sexuality are targeted. So when Blair reprobated Yellowman

---

<sup>178</sup> Sobo recounts the sermon of a Revival preacher who used the discourse around slackness to explain how humans inherited wickedness, saying that Lucifer and his ilk were expelled from heaven for slackness and came to earth and interfered sexually with humans, mingling their evil blood with humans (Sobo 1993, 116).

<sup>179</sup> This became apparent to me when we met congregants coming out of a socially conservative church in Kingston and instead of jeering at or criticizing Yellowman, they greeted him with celebrity admiration.

for his slackness on public television, Yellowman countered by tracing Blair's own moral shortcomings. This time, however, the trace did not arrive on a vinyl record, but occurred face to face.

Yellowman: I remember sitting in the living room in my house back in the eighties and was watching TV. Didn't have any cable, it was JBC. Pastor Blair been talking about how Yellowman and Bob Marley is not good for Jamaica and the people, because I was very popular at that time also. He said me slack and it's girl me talk about and immoral lyrics. So I go into a Shell gas station with my wife, I saw him and said, "You don't know me and you talk bad things about me. You only hear and you talk bad things about me and Bob Marley. You think you good for the Christian people of Jamaica." So me tell him, say, see him house have a satellite dish and it turn up, 'cause when it turn up a blue movie them a watch.

Yellowman used the opportunity to develop a trace that insinuated the pastor himself was guilty of transgressing well-known social proscriptions against pornography—his satellite dish's direction gave the impression that it was receiving a well-known signal from a pornographic, or "blue" station. Whether Blair actually watched pornography is not the issue. The point is that in a tracing argument moral deviancy—most often based on slim or absent evidence—can serve as a defence of the tracer's moral superiority and implicate their opponent in activities and beliefs that are counter to normative Jamaican values.

### ***Chapter Conclusion***

In this chapter I have argued that Yellowman was consciously concerned with putting into the public sphere an understanding of sexual ethics drawn from creole sexual *morés* for the purposes of regulating correct sexual behaviour in society and establishing for himself normative social status. I drew on Saunders' (2003) work on moral regulation in dancehall and interpreted Yellowman's sexual ethics through LaFont's (2001) theory of creolized sexuality. I used the song "Galong Galong Galong" to demonstrate how

slackness was employed to condemn sexual behaviour deemed unrespectable by Afro-Jamaican standards. The song also draws on Yellowman's Rastafarian religious worldview by aligning respectable sexual behaviour with religiously prescribed values, or "Jah law," whereas sexual deviancy is ascribed to satanic influence.

Slackness and sexuality often function in Yellowman's songs as an insult to, or attack on, his critics and rivals. By using the Caribbean rhetorical technique known as tracing, Yellowman outlined the moral failings of subjects he deemed immoral while at the same time strengthened the validity of his own sex-positive worldview. Tracing at once ostracizes the beliefs of the opponent and substantiates Yellowman's claim to normative sexual behaviour. By espousing the sexual ethics of his peers, Yellowman also was able to validate his normative status in society. In other words, as an outsider due to his albinism, Yellowman was more at risk of appearing "other" than his fellow deejays and any hint of behaviour or beliefs outside the accepted norm could be used against him in traces by his opponents. As such, by adopting and maintaining stances on homosexuality, polygyny, prostitution and oral sex that were in keeping with the Jamaican lower class's norm-value system, Yellowman portrayed himself as an insider in the community, helping to nullify his "other" status.

## CHAPTER 4

### Slackness & Culture: The Carnal Mind, the Jamaican Body and Rastafarian Dualism

You can't go to Zion with a carnal mind  
 Say dem with dirty mind you have to leave them behind  
 You can't go to Zion with your M16  
 Your hands and your heart have to be pure and clean  
 Clear off with the guns and the magazine  
 I tell you I beg you pass me the ital green  
 Come on now Natty chant up the roots and culture  
 Come and get it to the brothers and sister  
 Caw' Natty sat upon the rock and watch the wicked dem drop  
 Sat upon the rock and watch the wicked dem drop  
 — Yellowman, "Natty Sat Upon a Rock"<sup>180</sup>

In this final chapter I examine how slackness, for Yellowman, is included in culture Yellowman contends, and I believe this is demonstrated in his lyrics, that there is no moral dichotomy between sex and religion, between the physical and spiritual. In other words slackness is not in binary opposition to culture, as many scholars have suggested (Gilroy 1982, Hope 2006, Stolzoff 2000) and as the reggae industry itself has often promoted. By demonstrating how this relationship works in Yellowman's material I intend to show how dualistic Christian ideas of the body/spirit split have influenced Rastafarian thinking but have become altered in the Rastafarian context. Unlike the dominant Christian understanding of sexuality that pits the spiritual against the physical, Yellowman draws on an Afrocentric understanding of the body and sexuality that allows him to keep a dualistic framework of material/spiritual but without the sinful body theology found in Christianity. Leading Christian thinkers through the ages—such as

---

<sup>180</sup> The song was recorded on the "I Can't Hide" riddim, originally by Ken Parker

Augustine, Aquinas, Luther and Calvin—were heavily influenced by Greek notions of the dualistic relationship of flesh (the material world) and the spiritual plane, often considering sexuality an evil to be conquered through the repression of desire, and privileging virginity and chastity as higher ideals. I believe Rastafari has shifted this dualistic focus to a Babylon/Zion binary and displays little of the negative view of the body and sex found in Christianity. Using Yellowman's mobilization of the word *carnal* in songs such as "Natty Sat Upon a Rock" and "Can't Hide From Jah," I will demonstrate how he, on the one hand, upholds a Christian-derived dualistic worldview but has moved from the typical Christian oppositional relationship of body/spirit to a Rastafarian theology where the body, as long as it is pure, can be included in spiritual realm. I am not speaking of the body in the context of embodied spirituality, but rather unbridled sexual passion that, in Yellowman's interpretation, is perfectly in keeping with a Zion mindset. In this chapter I will also address the typical dualism found in reggae commentary of slackness and culture and show how this relationship instead contains numerous perforations and points of slippage.

### ***Christian Dualism and Sexuality***

This project is based on the premise that in traditional Christian scholarship and conventional practice sexuality is considered carnal or profane and therefore is in binary opposition to the sacred (McDannell 1995). The idea that sex is somehow a sin or unnatural does not enter Christianity through its Jewish antecedent, for the Jews that wrote the "Song of Solomon," the body was not an impediment to spirituality but was seen as a gift from God (Douglas 1999). While there were ascetic tendencies, such as

among the Essenes, Hebrew naturalism in general treated sexuality as a natural element of God's creation (Parrinder 1996) Later Christian taboos that demonized sexuality were instead derived from the Greeks who promoted spiritualistic dualism, or a split between body and spirit believing that beauty was only available to be perceived by the soul not the body Theologian Kelly Brown Douglas puts it this way "To appreciate this world, therefore, one had to essentially deny bodily pleasures and activities, including sexual activity, and strive for a more contemplative, ascetic life" (Douglas 1999, 25) This ideology is rooted in Plato who saw the body as an impediment to seeking truth and beauty

The body presents us with innumerable distractions, because of the necessity of looking after it, and again, if any illnesses assail it, they too hamper us in our pursuit of truth The body fills us with love, desire, and fear, and all kinds of phantasy and nonsense (Plato 1955, 51)

Sexual pleasure for Greek thinkers like Plato was considered of a lower order than the pursuit of the good, truth and beauty The body in itself was not evil—this is a later Christian addition—but the desire for sexual pleasure diminished the power for contemplation of the higher realities (Farley 2008) This separation of body and mind was later articulated by Roman Stoics who privileged reason over passion and emotion, both aspects of the bodily realm The Stoic axiom of "live according to nature" identified nature with divine order and reason Passion was opposed to this and sex that emerged from passion was viewed as corrupt, the only rational purpose of sex was procreation (Douglas 1999) This philosophy was also adopted by the early Christians, as well as an emphasis on sexual activity chiefly for the purposes of procreation

For much of Christian history sexuality was something humans must overcome

Christianity's attitude toward sexuality owes its biggest debt to Augustine, a neo-Platonic dualist who found in the fall of Adam the seeds of lust and passion—or those “genital aspects” that so disturbed him. Sexual relations of the pre-fall era, according to Augustine, were not sinful because they were for procreation only and lacked lustful intentions. Following Plato and the Stoics, one of Augustine's problems with sex was that passion overtakes reason, sex paralyzes not only the mind but the soul as well. And to purify the soul one had to turn away from sensual pleasures (Douglas 1999). As such sexual activity, whether physical or mental, was deemed sinful yet was tolerable for procreative purposes only within the bonds of marriage.

Augustine's dualistic thought was profoundly influential in the early church and his ideas were expounded upon by St. Thomas Aquinas, Luther and Calvin. Aquinas's views on proper sexual conduct were close to Augustine's: tolerable sexual intercourse was narrowly defined: heterosexual, between spouses and strictly for the purposes of procreation. Taking the emphasis off procreation, Protestant reformers such as Luther and Calvin were more liberal than their forebears and saw marriage as a controlled response to lustful urges.

European Christian sexual ethics were characterized by suppression of sexuality. Sexual morality meant sexual repression and this was the hallmark of a civilized society (LaFont 2001). Sexuality, believed to be an animalistic instinct, was controlled by the aid of religious convictions (Bullough 1994, LaFont 2001). The Christian imperative to control the body is found throughout the religion today. For instance, Beyer argues that the most important moral issue for the New Christian Right in America was control of the body, particularly control of sexuality (Beyer 2000). For many Christians then, the words

found in 1 Corinthians 12-20 “The body is the Lords,” are interpreted to mean that God determines the proper sexual use of the body While this is not unique to Christianity, what the modern western world did inherit from Christianity was the ability to not only link personhood with sexuality but to do so in such a way that meant that humans had to transcend this bodily vulgarity in order to truly know the divine (Douglas 1999, Foucault 1997)

What Christianity also introduced was the practice of devaluing people based on their sexual preferences and activities By narrowly defining sexuality as genital sexual activity, associating it with non-rational and sometimes satanic behaviour, and alienating believers from their sexuality by insisting they deny it, the Christian tradition developed a sexual ethic that was intolerant of other cultures, allowed the negation of personhood for so-called sexual deviants, and even offered divine sanction for colonial domination of those deviants This would have profound ramifications for Africans in the Caribbean colonies as they struggled to negotiate the sexual minefield of colonial Christian ethics Douglas sums up this argument succinctly “the historically dominant Christian attitude toward sexuality provided the ruling class with an effective tool for justifying its domination over others” (Douglas 1999, 29)

### ***The Afro-Caribbean Body***

Ideologies of the body and sexuality in Afro-Caribbean culture are derived both from European Christianity and African cultures As Chapter 3 explained this has resulted in what LaFont (2001) has called creole sexuality sex as a natural and pleasurable part of life but within the confines of propriety I now turn to a brief discussion of the place of

flesh and spirit in Jamaican history, society and religious culture in order to contextualize Yellowman's melding of slackness and culture and what I see as the general collapse of Christian duality in the Jamaican context I will then use Yellowman's use of the term carnal as a case study to explicate the connotations and meanings for looking at duality in a Jamaican and Rastafarian context and the implications of this for the discourse around slackness and culture in reggae

For the British Christian missionaries<sup>181</sup> that came to Jamaica sin was located in the body and had to be addressed through moral discipline, they were concerned with redemption from this "perennial state of sin," a state that could only be ultimately transcended through death (Austin-Broos 1997, 6) Missionary activity focused on the sexuality of enslaved Africans as a dominant site of immorality and therefore an impediment to spiritual mindfulness The West African worldview, on the other hand, included a more nuanced understanding of good and evil as interconnected companions in the world and not relegated to separate spheres such as earthly and spiritual (Ibid 6, 233) Stewart's work on Afro-Jamaican religions such as Obeah and Myal has importantly demonstrated this point Long considered by scholars to be either malevolent magic (Obeah) or benevolent magic (Myal), Stewart (2005) challenges this representation by suggesting that it was the dualistic mindset of western observers that mapped these African-derived religions as antagonistic and morally antithetic Instead, she argues they follow their West African forebears in being morally neutral Similarly, West African religious cultures had no clear demarcation between the sacred and the secular and this absence of dichotomous frames of existence meant that the strict binary of flesh/spirit did not exist Without the Platonic dualism or Augustinian aversion to the flesh so prevalent

---

<sup>181</sup> For a discussion of missionary activity in Jamaica during the slavery era, see Turner (1998)

in the western world, lust and sex were not treated as vices to be suppressed or conquered and the body was not vilified. African cultures embraced the intrinsic connection between sexuality and spirituality and viewed the entire human being—body and all—as part of the divine and found in every aspect of life opportunities for the divine manifested (Douglas 1999). In fact, Douglas suggests that the very notion of secularity has no place in African cultures. “Dualistic splits between the soul and body, heaven and earth, divine and flesh are nonexistent. This belief allowed Africans to celebrate sexuality as a sacred gift and opportunity” (Ibid. 132). This integrated worldview is also found in Afro-Caribbean religions where embodied spirituality, for instance, is not antithetical to religiosity.<sup>182</sup>

These two worldviews clashed under the conditions of slavery. The missionaries considered carnal relations out of wedlock sinful and pressured Africans to convert to Christianity, which they saw as the “antidote for African spirituality, religion and culture” (Stewart 2005, 92). Africans who converted had to renounce their African traditions as sinful but this posed a problem, as slave marriages were outlawed until 1826.

How could enslaved Africans maintain stable, monogamous relationships in a system that prohibited marriage, separated families, and enabled enslavers to habitually abuse African girls and women as sexual objects? African females had to recover from the effects of physical and psychological violation. And Christian missionary teaching on sexuality only intensified their predicament as they were made to feel ashamed of their bodies and were taught to disassociate pleasure and fulfillment from sexual encounters (Stewart 2005, 92).

Enslaved Africans were viewed by Europeans as immoral simply for being African but this was exasperated by European ideologies of sexual propriety that colonists used to legitimate their views of Africans as animalistic and depraved (Austin-

---

<sup>182</sup> For more on embodied spirituality in Afro-Caribbean religion see Austin-Brooks (1997) and Harding (2006).

Broos 1997, LaFont 2001) For Europeans, morality was equated with civility and was that which separated humans from animals. They viewed their slaves as *ipso facto* immoral, believing that they were by nature licentious with no control over sexual appetites, and were promiscuous, this was reinforced through the “nakedness (although often forced), sexual jokes, innuendo, and serial relationships of the slaves” (LaFont 2001, paragraph 19). Elites feared that African sexuality could awaken lustful urges in Christians that were normally suppressed, this fear of moral contamination led to both sexual exploitation and sexual interaction (Ibid). According to LaFont’s research, Europeans encountered a broader range of sexual opportunity and less censure in the colonies. Their misinterpretation of the Africans’ sex-positive worldview for immorality gave Europeans the justification for the sexual exploitation and prostitution of slaves and also led to the stereotypical notions of black promiscuity. Take, for instance, James Phillippo’s 1843 account of Jamaican life and culture, which clearly demonstrates the elite attitude LaFont describes.

The sanctities of marriage were almost unknown, there was no such thing, indeed, as legitimate marriage among the slaves. This sacred institute was ridiculed by the negroes, and regarded as inimical to their happiness. Under such circumstances the state of society can be easily conceived. Licentiousness the most degraded and unrestrained was the order of the day. Every estate on the island—every negro hut was a common brothel every female a prostitute, and every man a libertine. Many aged individuals have frequently assured the writer that among the female slaves there were none who had not sacrificed all pretensions to virtue before they had attained their fourteenth year, whilst hundreds were known to have become mothers before they had even entered upon their teens. Polygamy was also common. So far as an agreement between themselves was concerned, they may be said to have formed a matrimonial alliance, but their affection was liable to frequent interruptions, and divorces were consequently of common occurrence (Phillippo 1843, 218-219).

Phillippo’s hyperbole, “every negro hut was a common brothel every female a prostitute,

and every man a libertine” was proof enough for him to condemn Africans as unsanctified, unvirtuous and unrestrained Phillippo’s account reveals his Christian-derived sex-as-evil morality and also his deliberate dismissal of the oppression, inequality and exploitation Africans suffered during slavery

The case of Jamaican Pentecostals is instructive for understanding how competing sexual ideologies—European suppression and African life affirmation—played out in Jamaican history<sup>183</sup> Pentecostal preachers in Jamaica regularly concern themselves with the non-married sinners who live what is known as the “sweetheart life”—unwed cohabitation As Chevannes (2006, 2001) and LaFont (2001) have shown, marriage rates in Jamaica are far lower than average in the western world, a hold-over from the centuries of slavery where marriage was illegal While many enslaved Africans did convert to Christianity, Afro-Jamaicans routinely rejected the church’s teaching on unmarried sexuality (Ibid ) Sex, for Jamaican Pentecostals, is the chief sin and salvation is attained for sinners through bringing them into accord with strict European Christian sexual morés Alarmed at the regularity and normalcy of fornication on the island Jamaican Pentecostalism targeted sex as a crucial site of moral turpitude with the result being that marriage became a rite of sanctification, a ritual that altered the sinner into a saint Referred to by Austin-Broos (1997) as “Jamaican Perfectionism,” marriage became a sign of holiness or perfection because it allows the practitioner to stop the sin of fornication and therefore render the body spiritually clean Jamaican Perfectionism mixes the American Pentecostal emphasis on morality with an African sense of embodied religion, for married Pentecostal women, the body becomes a vessel for the Holy Spirit—called a Transcendental Bride This union of flesh and spirit signifies a marriage between the

---

<sup>183</sup> This section is an overview of Austin-Broos’s (1997) research

believer and Jesus, through perfectionism the body is joined with the body of Christ. Saints can “fall from grace,” however, through moral breaches focused on the body that result in tainting the body and making it unclean for the Holy Spirit. Examples of moral breaches are smoking, drinking or going to the dancehall, and, of course, fornication.

The attitudes toward the place of the body in relation to spirituality for Jamaican Pentecostals differ greatly from their American counterparts and it is here that we can see the syncretic nature of European dualism and the African integrated worldview. Jamaicans accepted the Christian frailty of the flesh dogma and made it their fundamental moral issue. Only through a denial of non-matrimonial sexuality could believers become saints. Yet while the Puritan ancestors of Pentecostals were considered fundamentally antagonistic to “sensuous culture,” avoided “all spontaneous enjoyment of life,” and shunned eudemonism and hedonism, their Jamaican denominational relations privilege embodied spirituality (Austin-Broos 1997, 124, Weber 1958, 53, 105). Whereas for Puritans joy was attained in the afterlife, Africans believed in the ability for joy in this life. In other words the lines drawn between flesh and spirit in the moral order of European enlightenment rationality do not exist in African, and consequently Afro-Jamaican, religion. This Jamaicanization of the religion is especially evident in embodied forms of worship. Jamaican Pentecostal services are joyous celebrations of the sanctification conferred on saints by the Holy Ghost, singing and dancing can last for hours. Whereas in American Pentecostal churches the Holy Spirit experience is brought on through concentration and prayer, in Jamaican services it is cultivated through “religious fervour and excitement through sense-oriented forms of self-expression” such as dancing, singing and worshipful bodily movements (Austin-Broos 1997, 124-125,

Hopkin 1978, 25) Music plays an important part in this Jamaicanization of the religion the music, rhythm and movement take on a religiously potent quality—singing and dancing are religious experiences in themselves This is the role of music as an embodiment of worship rather than a frame of worship (Austin-Broos 1997) Through this example we can see that the place of the body in Jamaican spirituality is radically different than that found in its Judeo-Christian heritage In other words, “lively bodies in Jamaica need not purvey the message of sin” (Ibid , 124)

This helps explain how a reggae concert can revolve between pious religious ceremony and hedonistic carnality Yellowman routinely mixes the sexual and spiritual in his performances He regularly uses the microphone as a phallus onstage in conjunction with slack lyrics but most concerts also include elements not far removed from the Pentecostal (or perhaps Revival) worship experience call and response on the ubiquitous chant “Jah” and “Rastafari,” group singing and religious instruction Even the dancing, singing, rhythm and movement take on an embodied religious quality

I once reviewed a Buju Banton concert in London, Ontario, pointing out this pairing of the spiritual and sexual “Ragamuffin prophet, sex symbol or charming ladies’ man, Buju Banton’s rule on reggae music is partly based in his ability to embody the spiritual, the carnal and the sweetheart both in song and person ” Banton devoted the first half of his set to the largely cultural material on his first two cultural Rasta albums, *Til Shiloh* and *Inna Heights* and “occasionally took time, preacher-style, to remind listeners of the socially conscious message underlying much of his music ” I then commented that as the tone changed to his harder edged dancehall material

Buju gyrated, theatrically re-enacted intercourse and, at one point during the night, let a female fan grope his upper thigh Then, the singer/deejay levelled the

vibes as he announced, ‘I wanna play a song for the woman dem ’’ (Hagerman 2007)

Performances like Yellowman’s and Banton’s represent the ability to pair the sexual and the spiritual and signify the breach of flesh/spirit duality. They are examples of embodied religion where the sexualized body-performance does not undermine the religious sentiment. Banton and Yellowman are in no way mocking religion by including their cultural material alongside their slack material. For them there is no dichotomy represented by the two. Like their African forebears, they are tapping into a non-dualistic unity of experience to celebrate the sanctity of human sexuality.

Another site where the strict categories of flesh and spirit are breached in Jamaica is health. Among rural Jamaicans, sickness is treated as punishment for some transgression of the moral order, be it small—ignoring advice to get out of the rain—or large—sodomy performed in the church yard (Sobo 1993, 2). Physical sickness is the result of immoral activity or anti-social behaviour. Health is attained through balance with the moral order. This association with morality and health links the natural world with the spiritual world, by viewing the body as interconnected with the spiritual world, we are able to see another way that Afro-Jamaicans have negotiated their religious landscape by integrating African beliefs into Afro-Jamaican forms of religious culture. Bodily taboos against homosexual or oral-genital contact and sex during menstruation are infringements upon the moral order and carry serious repercussions that could result in physical sickness (Ibid ).

The ethnophysiological dangers of cunnilingus (and fellatio) are used to justify proclamations of its ascribed immorality: a group of men attributed a (verified) rise in throat cancer to an increasing “slackness” with regard to oral sex ” (Ibid, 235)

Birth control is another contentious site of not only moral but also political and religious import due to its anti-social nature in a culture where procreation is highly valued. Having children is seen as a social commitment to community and kin so birth control not only blocks new important social ties, it also implies hatred of children, selfishness and lack of commitment to the community (Ibid ). It is also thought to disrupt normal health by blocking the flow of natural substances and can lead to physical debilitation (Ibid )

In addition, family planning on the part of females also limits the amount of control males have over their sexual partners, resulting in men being the most vocal opponents against birth control. Yawney has called Jamaica a matrifocal society because women by default assume the responsibility for raising children and maintaining households (Yawney 1989)<sup>184</sup> Tied up in the importance of children is the cultural code that men demonstrate their masculinity through producing offspring and may have several children with different women. But since women carry the burdens—financial, physical, emotional, social—of raising the children, there is motivation for them to seek other “baby fathers” that may help support the children (Ibid, 188). In addition children born out of wedlock in Jamaica are not seen as a breach of social propriety. Enslaved women were ostracized either for premarital sexual relationships or outside children, and for Jamaicans, as in Africa, children born out of wedlock were not seen as a calamity, “the calamity was barrenness” (Blassingame 1979, Douglas 1999, 65)

Rastafarians share society’s attitudes surrounding family planning but they also associate birth control with government initiatives that seek to control the black ghetto

---

<sup>184</sup> Yawney is careful to distinguish matrifocality from matriarchy because the latter implies that women have power whereas the former further contributes to the exploitation of women (Yawney 1989, 186)

population In this way Rastafarian discourse on birth control takes on a post-colonial politics of liberation where contraception is representative of further oppression of blacks by whites and is grouped with police brutality, immigration policies and cultural genocide (Yawney 1976)

The Rastas are unanimously opposed to birth-control programs They say that this is part of the white man's plan to beat down the black man They feel that the earth has ample resources to sustain the world's peoples if only the wealth were shared more equitably They argue that the world's problems will be solved when love is realized as the major force and not oppression (Ibid , 240)

Society's attitudes toward birth control and procreation are amply displayed in reggae, with many Rastafarian artists voicing their opinions Not only have several reggae artists released anti-birth control and anti-abortion songs (Black Uhuru, Yellowman, Johnny Clarke and Linval Thompson all have songs called "Abortion"), sex in slack lyrics always comes with the possibility of procreation "Sex can be recreational, but the possibility of procreating should be inherent in the act," (Sobo 1993, 235) Yellowman's lyrics about sex often centre around procreation his "Abortion" calls abortion murder and other songs variously claim paternity (bragging that proof can be found in his long list of girlfriends because they all have yellow babies) or deny it, but still instantiate for his audience that he is not anti-social, because he has children In general, Yellowman's work pre-1988 was in keeping with his Jamaican and Rastafarian beliefs surrounding procreation and birth control

However, Yellowman overrode the cultural ideal of reproduction in 1988 with the song "AIDS " While other artists had sung about AIDS previously (Josey Wales' "Want No AIDS," King Kong's "AIDS a Go Round," I Roy's "AIDS"), Yellowman broke with social tradition by promoting condom use

Love is a serious thing no tek it fe fun  
 When you meet a girl use a condom  
 Because this disease is going around  
 And this disease is putting us down  
 No exchange, no refund  
 Once you catch AIDS your life is done  
 —Yellowman, “AIDS”

Troubled by the AIDS epidemic, he trumped allegiance to Jamaican’s moral order with an educational message about the dangers of unprotected sex. This also meant that he breached the one precept that Yawney argues is unanimously agreed upon among Rastas (Yawney 1976, 239-249). Yellowman would revisit this theme with 1993’s song “Condom.” Buju Banton followed suit in 1994 with “Willie (Don’t be Silly)” but as far as I can ascertain, Yellowman is the first reggae artist to promote safe sex through condom use. The Government of Jamaica started its 1989 safe sex campaign using stickers that read “Only you can stop AIDS, use a condom” a full year after Yellowman’s first pro-condom song. This is Yellowman taking his role as a sexual educator seriously; previous songs focused on moral regulation to uphold the Afro-Jamaican sexual code. This one breaches that code but invites his listeners to breach it with him for the sake of their own safety.

Before you mek love today remember to use up the condom  
 The condom you no say it mek for every man  
 The condom you know are me secret weapon  
 The condom me use it up for protection  
 The condom you know a fe all nation  
 —Yellowman “Condom”

Yellowman again sang about condoms in 1995 with the song “Mind you Catch AIDS.” The song was directed at males (rude bwoy, bad bwoy, Mister Mention, Mister

Loverman) who were against birth control and argues that “Naturality I agree is nice” but “don’t roll away your life like dice ”

There is an important nuance to these songs, Yellowman is careful not to support condom usage on the grounds of it being used as birth control, but only as a precaution against disease. Implicitly then, his songs about sex still leave open the possibility of procreation. As such, his songs about condoms are really not meant as songs about birth control, which would be anti-social, but instead about bodily health. In this way Yellowman follows a well-worn tradition in reggae, to inform the population about a dangerous disease currently going around, and fits well within the tradition of Caribbean popular music to compose a song about current events. and AIDS was certainly a potent topic of conversation in the media in the late eighties. Papa Michigan & General Smiley had a hit with “Diseases” in the late seventies, a humorous public service announcement about sexually transmitted diseases, and Sassafrass borrowed the theme soon after for his first single, “Pink Eye.” Yellowman has revisited the disease theme several times in his career (first sexually transmitted diseases in “Shorties” and then gonorrhea, syphilis, herpes and AIDS in “Nuff Punanny”) and later in several tracks that speak about AIDS.

Attitudes toward the body in Jamaica differ greatly from those of the missionaries that sought to instigate salvation through moral discipline. Sobo tells us that sex is considered healthy—an activity that strengthens the body (Sobo 1993). There is a belief among some lower class women in Jamaica that irregular sex or abstinence is unhealthy. Health is attained through “keeping channels open” and coitus is seen as an instrument of openness (Austin-Broos 1997, 147). In general research shows that the African cultures that arrived in the new world could not have conceived of the European’s concept of

celibacy as a higher spiritual practice and would not have equated sex with sin or evil (Blassingame 1979) Sexuality in dancehall, then, is in keeping with Jamaican society's stance on sexuality as healthy, procreative, natural and enjoyable

Having looked at European and Afro-Jamaican ideologies of the body, and demonstrating how the dualism found in Christianity is often breached in the Jamaican context, I now turn to Yellowman's use of the term carnal in order to argue that one way slackness can be theorized in his music is as a focal point for the perforation of the flesh/spirit dualism

### ***Forward Inna Zion, Backward Inna Babylon: Rastafarian Dualism***

In several songs (such as "Can't Hide From Jah," "Fools Go to Church," "Youthman Promotion," and "Natty Sat Upon a Rock") Yellowman repeats a lyric that lays out criteria for entering Zion His central idea is that carnal minded people are banned from Zion and it is the utilization of the word carnal that is the focus of this section His popular refrain "You can't go to Zion with your carnal mind" is at the heart of this project and, I think, holds a key to understanding how Yellowman balances the carnal and the spiritual, and by extension offers a way to understand Rastafarian attitudes toward the body

The word carnal, according to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, has several meanings, though the most prominent in current usage relates to the body and sexuality "of or pertaining to the flesh or body, bodily, corporeal," "pertaining to the body as the seat of passions or appetites, fleshly, sensual," and, simply, "sexual" The word was used

by early Christian writers such as Tertullian to mean “fleshly” Tied up in this usage is the second main definition of carnal, namely “not spiritual” Carnal in this sense refers to worldly goods and practices, materialism and secularity

For me the phrase in Yellowman’s songs always represented a distilled version of his outlook on religion and slackness—given further credence by its appearance in numerous songs—and gave insight into his genius The line “You can’t go to Zion with a carnal mind,” in particular, I felt, was a ludic tongue in cheek reference to himself As the King of Slack Yellowman surely had the most carnal mind of all, yet here he was preaching about the road to Zion The song can certainly be interpreted this way—a clever jab at a society preoccupied with Judeo-Christian sexual constraint Under this reading Yellowman is saying one thing to mean another, in effect telling us that he is bound for Zion even though society would deny him this based on his slack lyrics He lampoons the link with sex and religion—the dualism of the body and spirit—to point out how the taboo is a mere social construction that he does not share Put into context with his other material, this is a natural way to read this song Yellowman continually champions the carnal by boasting about his own body, desiring the female body, and lauding sex drive, physical pleasure and even materialism such as in the song “Walking Jewellery Store” He often does this alongside material that praises variously God, Jah and Haile Selassie, and in general is closely aligned with standard Rastafarian principles Yellowman’s entire project is nothing less than a dismantling of the centuries old Hellenistic derived Christian dualism that pits the pleasures of the body and the physical world against the greater pursuits of the mind and spirit and as such is a cunning plot to undermine colonial Christian-imposed codes of ethics, decency and social behaviour

That is, if this is how he meant carnal to be interpreted in this clutch of songs. But he did not. In fact, Yellowman did not use the word in a sexual sense at all. His mobilization of the term is closer to corporeal, worldly, secular, material, and temporal.<sup>185</sup> His own definition of the word is “bad-minded” which can be read as “unrighteous”, he offers the following example: “if somebody [was] jealous of you they would be carnal-minded.” The song, then, becomes a judgment on people who put material needs and evil deeds ahead of spiritual concerns. Yellowman offers examples of the carnal mind: “You can’t go to Zion inna limousine / You can’t go to Zion with your M16” (From “Youthman Promotion”), or “You can’t go to Zion with your ammunition” (from “Can’t Hide From Jah” and “Fools Go to Church”). You can, however, sing graphically sexual songs, chat at length about your coital talents, brag about your 100 sexual partners, pine for a virgin and still get to Zion.

Yellowman borrowed the carnal mind phrase from similar songs of the early seventies by Yabby You (“Carnal Mind”), Ras Michael & The Sons Of Negus (“Carnal Mind”) and Brother Joe and the Rightful Brothers (“Go to Zion”).<sup>186</sup> These versions are closely based on an old Jamaican hymn but were reworked as reverential Rastafarian songs (Grass 2009, 181). Yabby You’s version, for instance, uses the following lyric from The Melodians’ “Rivers of Babylon”: “So let the words of our mouth / And the meditation of our hearts / Be accepted in thy sight, oh Far-I.” Far-I is a short form of Rastafari and refers to Selassie. Ras Michael’s version insists that “Rastafari no want no

---

<sup>185</sup> While Yellowman insists that he did not intend carnal to infer sex, the term does have an established connotation to sex in Jamaica. For instance, in the Jamaican legal code “carnal abuse” refers to sexual assault. This leaves open the possibility that Yellowman used the term knowing its double meaning.

<sup>186</sup> Several other reggae songs take up this theme as well, among them “Can’t Enter Zion With Your Big Checkbook” by Niney & the Observers and “Enter the Kingdom of Zion” by Barry Brown.

carnal mind”<sup>187</sup>

Just as Yellowman employed the Jamaican artistic tradition of borrowing and updating lyrics from other artists, his own lyrics have been subject to reinvention at the hands of his contemporaries and followers in a somewhat interlocutory fashion. His carnal mind lyrics were adopted by Damian Marley and Chew Stick in their song “Carnal Mind” and the sentiment in the updated version remains much as Yellowman had intended it two decades before.<sup>188</sup> This version announces “Me say dash your badness, and your bad mind / The carnal mind, have to stay behind,” confirming Yellowman’s own linking of the word carnal to badness. For Marley badness in the song is demonstrated in much the same way as Yellowman: according to Marley you can’t go to Zion with material goods (“chain and ring,” “portable phone”) or implements of violence (“big rusty nine,” “big 45”).

Yellowman’s carnal mind lyrics are an opportunity to examine how he can dismantle Christian dualism and replace it with an Afrocentric model of wholeness. More than this, however, Yellowman’s carnal mind lyrics are indicative of another sort of duality found uniquely in Rastafari. Here the categories of Babylon and Zion function as powerful modes used to order Rastafarian truth and reality. Notably though, this binary, while still maintaining a material/spiritual split, remains body-positive.

The artist intended the word carnal to express negativity and explicated it in song by showing examples that are close to the meaning of the word as worldly, anti-spiritual and materialistic. References to guns and ammunition—and their associations with death and destruction—reiterate that carnal, for Yellowman, is the opposite to the spiritual. This

---

<sup>187</sup> Patois follows many African languages in the common use of double or even triple negatives (Adams 1994)

<sup>188</sup> “Carnal Mind” was released as a UK only bonus track on *Welcome to Jamrock*

is more apparent when read against his Rastafarian faith and Rastafarian understandings of Africa, Zion, Babylon, repatriation and death. Rastafari eschews anything to do with death, so much to the point that words like “dedicated,” with its homophonic link with the word “dead,” are altered to “livedicated” in order to emphasize the Rastafarian preoccupation with life over death.<sup>189</sup> Rastafarians believe that they will enter to Zion in this life, without going through death first.

The dualistic relationship between the concepts of Zion and Babylon—which represent the forces of good and evil in Rastafari—is a major organizing principle for the movement. All aspects of life are envisaged through the Babylon/Zion binary including categories such as health and disease, sacred and profane, purity and contamination (Yawney 1976). People are also grouped using this dichotomy as a rubric. Bad-minded people represent or are inclined towards Babylon whereas spiritually minded people are inclined towards Zion (Ibid). In Yabby You’s “Carnal Mind” Zion represents purity “Holy Mount Zion is a holy place / No sins cannot enter there.” Likewise whole categories of people—whites, Catholics, politicians or law enforcement officers for instance—can be categorized as Babylonians. Yawney suggests that this dichotomy was constructed by Rastafarians as a model to understand their situation of oppression at the hands of colonial and neo-colonial society, as well as to envision solutions for their plight (Ibid).

The Zion and Babylon symbols are multivalent. Zion is a sort of real-time heaven, part physical part spiritual, and is situated in Ethiopia and/or Africa though its geographic

---

<sup>189</sup> For more on Rastafarian attitudes toward death, see Hagerman, Brent “Buried above the ground: In search of a Rastafarian doctrine of death at the Bob Marley Mausoleum,” forthcoming in *Wadabagei: A Journal of the Caribbean and its Diasporas*, April 2011.

locale is overlaid with Biblical terrain<sup>190</sup> As such, Jordan River might be said to flow through Zion It is the domain of Haile Selassie, the living God Africa, for Rastafarians, is the Promised Land, a both mythical and tangible Zion situated in Ethiopia Rastas view Zion in much the same way as another Afro-Jamaican religion, Revival Zion For Revival Zionists, Zion is both “geographic and existential, where Africans were ensured freedom, dignity, the conditions for authentic self-repossession, and the eradication of European colonial authority” (Stewart 2005, 134) Drawing from this understanding of Zion, the Rastafarian interpretation utilized Ethiopianism, an already established hermeneutic among black Christians in America and the Caribbean and widely disseminated by people such as Marcus Garvey, Henry McNeal, Martin R Delany and Robert Athlyl Rogers Ethiopianism approached the Christian Bible and the white Christian tradition with suspicion and reinterpreted biblical stories through the eyes of Africa Common characteristics were positive presentations of Africa, a reverential self-identification of diasporic Africans with the African continent and its history, and a race-centric theology that understood God, Jesus and the biblical population to be black Africans (Gebrekidan 2001)

The importance of Ethiopia to Rastafari was augmented by its role in anti-colonial campaigns in the early twentieth century The only African power to resist European colonialism, Ethiopia stood alone on the continent as a free African country with a black head of state (Stewart 2005) Indeed it was Selassie’s well-publicized 1930 coronation as Emperor that scholars credit as the catalytic event that sparked the establishment of the religion (Edmonds 2003)

It was this Ethiopian Pan-Africanism that informed how the Rastas understood

---

<sup>190</sup> Ethiopianism interchanges the terms Africa and Ethiopia

Zion and was influenced, to be sure, by the theology of black destiny taught by Garvey and others at the time. Garvey, the de facto generative prophet of Rastafari, preached an African Zionism that involved separating the races, establishing a black religion, liberating Africa from white control, black nationalism on a global scale, and the ultimate redemption of the black race. For the early Rastas who were beginning to preach Selassie's divinity, Zion became a utopian concept that offered solutions to both their physical predicament (solved through repatriation) and their mental imprisonment (solved through an identification of Zion with spiritual freedom, heaven and black destiny). Zion, then, is a catch all concept that encompassed heaven and Africa and everything these two terms connote for African diasporic populations.

Alternatively, Jamaica, along with the western world with its legacy of colonialism and slavery, is understood as Babylon. This too is a broad concept that includes all oppressive and corrupt systems of the world and injustice in any form (Edmonds 1998). Yawney has defined it in conjunction with the Babylon/Zion binary as "non-Rasta society" and notes that many Rastas separate themselves from Babylon by living, for example, in autonomous camps (Yawney 1976, 232). With the African continent able to represent Zion, the natal land of Jah and Rastafarians, Babylon therefore becomes its opposite: geographic areas as well as political, social and religious entities that are non-African. And while Selassie reigns over Zion, and his subjects are largely black, Babylon is the jurisdiction of the Pope—whom many Rastas have historically chided as the Anti-Christ, Satan, even the head of the Mafia, and his subjects are understood as mostly white (Yawney 1976). The Babylon/Zion binary then mirrors the colonial project's own categorical distinctions but importantly inverts the hierarchy

Africa/Europe, black/white, non-Christian/Christian, civilized/ savage, life everlasting/damnation

The prime directive in Rastafari is to get to Zion. But whereas enslaved Africans believed that in death they would return to Africa (Owens 1982), Rastafarians invert this and claim that repatriation is something that will happen in life. Christianity taught the enslaved Africans to be obedient and subservient and wait to achieve their reward in the afterlife (Albanese 2007). Rastafarians—who not only identify as descendants of enslaved Africans but also see themselves in a similar scenario of “sufferation” at the hands of neo-colonialists—saw this colonial Christian doctrine as a ploy to deceive blacks. Instead, they preach that Rastas do not die to see God, they live to see God (Owens 1982). Heaven does not come after death, Zion is attainable in this life. Rastas downplay the Christian idea that sin is an earthly state followed by a sinless heavenly transcendence. Transcendence for them occurs on earth and is instigated by humans (Austin-Broos 1997). This plays out in Yellowman’s songs as the celebration, not the denial of, the flesh, not only are humans not inherently sinful, their sexual desires are not some devilish ploy to impede their spiritual transcendence.

For Rastas Jah is the God of the living, not the dead, as is represented in this quote from a Rasta meeting: “A live man God a deal with, for when you are dead, you are just gone” (Yawney 1976, 245). Rastafarians, following the Afrocentric philosophy of Marcus Garvey, self-identify as African. Yawney’s fieldwork in the early seventies found that Rastas regard themselves as citizens of Ethiopia and on this basis refuse to partake in the Jamaican census (Ibid). Yellowman includes himself in this, as I mentioned in Chapter 1 he insists that even though his skin colour is not black he still comes from the African

land Rastafarians have a religio-political allegiance to Africa Leonard Howell, a prominent early Rastafarian leader, taught his followers that they were not under the authority of the Jamaican government or the British crown, but instead were subjects of their God-king, Ethiopia's Haile Selassie (Lee 2003)

As such repatriation to Africa has been one of the main goals of Rastafari since the movement's inception but by the early eighties repatriation was reinterpreted as either voluntary migration to Africa, returning to Africa culturally and symbolically, or rejecting western values and preserving African roots and black pride (Murrell 1998) This has become realized as a common sense of identity/solidarity within the group that is predicated upon a movement-wide embracing of the African past, recognition of the historical suffering of slavery, a shared sense of pain living in poverty in Jamaica, and the common struggle for liberation from Babylon

As a key influential Rastafarian thinker, Bob Marley plainly laid out the scope of the Babylon/Africa dualism with Africa as the geographic and spiritual centre of Rastafarian cosmology<sup>191</sup> In several of his songs, such as "War" and much of the material on the album *Survival*, Marley speaks of a final apocalyptic battle of good over evil in which Selassie will defeat the forces of Babylon and Rastas will be repatriated to Africa In this eschatological vision, Selassie reigns supreme over creation (often referred to by Rastas as "Earth's Rightful Ruler"<sup>192</sup>) and Africa appears as a physical and metaphysical holy land/homeland As the natural home of Rastafarians, Africa functions as the religious-political geographic centre of the religion while Babylon is characterized as the hinterland of captivity and diaspora

---

<sup>191</sup> Marley was a member of the Twelve Tribes of Israel and is commonly cited as the person who is responsible for the dissemination of Rastafari on a global scale (Bradley 2001, Gilroy 1982, Jones 1988)

<sup>192</sup> Yellowman uses this referent in the song "Morning Ride "

This Rastafarian dualism between Babylon and Zion infiltrates Yellowman's material thoroughly where Babylon is affiliated with death, violence, negativity, uncleanness, unrighteousness and materialism and Zion with life, peace, positivity, purity, righteousness and the spiritual. In the above song examples, guns and ammunition represent death whereas Africa represents life. Yellowman sums up the Rasta ideology around this binary succinctly in "Youthman Promotion" when he chants "Forward inna Zion and backward inna Babylon." Forward not only implies a direction (as in onward to Zion), it also is the chant used by a dancehall audience to praise a particularly pleasing song. Backward is an indictment of the unstable world of Babylon and suggests that Africans cannot succeed in Babylon.

These songs, then, portray carnal as the material realm as well as a bad-minded urge or action over and against Zion as the spiritual realm that is only entered if one is "pure and clean." It is here we can see the beginnings of how Yellowman and Rastafari can include aspects of the temporal world (i.e. the body) within the spiritual realm. Unlike in Christianity the body can enter Zion—seen both in the doctrine that Rastas do not die to enter Zion, and in Yellowman's continued pairing of the sexual and spiritual. The proviso is that it is not just any body—it must be one that is "pure and clean." Rastas reject the notion of a heaven-dwelling God in the sky that transcends humanity in favour of a God-man who is fully human and fully divine, a man rules over Zion. Likewise, Rastas believe that each African is a manifestation of the divinity, all blacks are divine incarnations (Stewart 2005). The allowance for divinity in the flesh ruptures dualism to a far greater extent than the Christology of the son of God because it is not simply the divine that can choose to adopt the flesh temporarily to visit the temporal world. Rather

all Africans possess humanity and divinity all the time whether in Babylon or in Zion Repatriation to Africa does not change this (as death would in Christianity) and this world is not simply temporal, as transcendence occurs in this life

While the body is not anathema to Zion, Rastafari does have strict codes around its cleanliness and purity to ensure an inclination toward Zion Purity involves not only physical cleanliness but also spiritual cleanliness (Yawney 1976) Rastas have developed a physical hygiene rubric to keep the body pure that involves dietary restrictions, taboos concerning the preparation of food, elaborate rules concerning the preparation of and consumption of smoking ganja and prohibitions against sodomy, and surrounding menstruation (Saunders 2003, Sobo 1993, Yawney 1976) Spiritual purity infers living naturally and being inclined toward Zion and Jah or what Rastas refer to as “livity” or righteous living “In Rastology, naturalness and purity are essential for conforming to the livity” (Stewart 2005, 123) Livity can be maintained through rituals such as reasoning, meditation and chalice smoking (Ibid) “The smoking of herbs in a communal setting provides the rite of passage wherein one temporarily enters a sacred realm and partakes of Zion despite one’s Babylonian attachments” (Ibid, 238)

Yellowman’s song offers further ideas on how to conform to the livity the “Ital green” that takes the place of guns in the song could refer to marijuana or the *ites* (red), gold and green—the Ethiopian cum Rastafari flag Either would certainly qualify as necessary for clean living under the terms of Rasta livity The use of ital, especially in conjunction with the lyric “Natty don’t nyam cow” found in “Youthman Promotion,” also connotes the near vegetarian Rastafarian diet, again, a means to purify the body In short ital refers to livity

The song's subject, simply dubbed "Natty," an obvious referent to a Rastafarian, exemplifies clean living by going to Africa seeking spiritual enlightenment (the use of the Bible in the song signifies this) and begins to "chant up the roots and culture" or adopt and promote Rastafari as a life-choice. The Babylon/Zion dualism is further demonstrated in "Natty Sat Upon a Rock" where the same subject builds a house in Africa. Africa here is conceived as a safe haven, a home or a homeland, whereas in Babylon there is nothing but death and destruction. "In a Babylon a pure man slaughter / Me can't get no fun, neither laughter." His use of "pure" here could refer to an Ital person (observant, Zion-inclined) or pure as in "nothing but" or "only" (Cassidy 2002, 367).

Other songs also go further in outlining purity. "Beat it," previously examined in Chapter 3, is critical of practices that unnaturally alter the body. Yellowman continues this theme in "Care Your Body" by condemning the practice of skin bleaching using creams such as Ambi. "Cause they use Ambi and they soil their body." According to the song, beauty pageant contestants used Ambi to lighten their faces and make them more appealing to the judges. "Brown face and black body, when you use Ambi that what me see." Yellowman's denouncement of the practice centres on purity and also health. *The Gleaner* reported in 1999 that health officials became alarmed at the detrimental effects of some of these products when many people reported damaged skin after usage (*The Gleaner* July 16, 1999). He counteracts the unnatural practice by telling his audience about his own fitness regime, including early rising, jogging and push-ups in order to reiterate a focus on bodily health. Physical health, including sexual health, are part and parcel of the lividity in Yellowman's philosophy of Zion.

The song also makes an important critique about how European beauty standards

have infiltrated black culture to the extent that even black society thinks lighter skin is more beautiful. Charles sees this phenomenon as an example of low self-esteem among blacks due to the internalization of the hatred of black skin bestowed on enslaved Africans by their colonizers. “Skin bleaching is the contemporary evidence of the deep-rooted and lingering psychological scars of slavery in particular and colonization in general” (Charles 2003, 712). Yellowman’s promotion of a natural body is in keeping with Rastafari’s Afrocentric agenda and its confrontation of the white supremacist Afrophobic legacy. A natural or Ital lifestyle includes the avoidance of processed foods and beauty products, particularly if they can be associated with white supremacy (such as hair straighteners and skin lighteners) (Stewart 2005, 123).

Purity of mind and body are prerequisites for entering Zion. But in Yellowman’s usage of the word carnal it seems as though the fleshly or sexual connotation is omitted. It surprised him when I presented him with my interpretation of the song—that it was a sarcastic and facetious salvo at critics of slackness that uses self-deprecation to make a larger point about the ridiculousness of the body/spiritual dichotomy. Obviously used to outsider’s interpretations of his songs, he was comfortable with my reading, but insisted that he did not mean the word in the sexual sense.<sup>193</sup> Even still, there is no hint anywhere in his music that sexuality is antithetical to spirituality. I suggest then, that the word carnal can be used as a way to access the rupture of the standard western and Christian body/spirit duality in Yellowman’s material. On the one hand he upholds the dichotomous thinking but beneath the surface he twists the dualism away from standard western usage and fashions it for his own ends. By insisting that “Your hands and your heart have to be

---

<sup>193</sup> His exact words here were “you could say that, even though it not meant to mean sexual.” And, of course, reading the song apart from the author’s intended meaning can be instructional for making discoveries about latent or implicit meanings in the material that might not be apparent even to the creator.

pure and clean” before you enter ZION, he perforates a truly dualistic understanding of carnal which would separate hands (of the body) from heart (of the spirit) But Yellowman includes the body here, just as Rastafarians include the body in their repatriation to ZION. And since for him this is not a tongue and cheek song, we can safely assume that Yellowman sees no problem with entering ZION as an adulterer, a sex symbol and a slackness deejay.

Part of this has to do with how Yellowman defines slackness. Whereas in Jamaican society the word “slackness” carries a connotation of impropriety or transgression of the moral order, for Yellowman, slackness is just sex, reality and entertainment. Like other deejays he often revolves between the term slackness and “reality” to describe his music. Reality songs depict everyday ghetto life—guns, sexual encounters, social struggles, and so on. By defining sex as reality Yellowman is able to categorize it as natural or *ital*, a part of the *livity* and therefore is in no way a transgression of the moral order. Slackness, like sex, is not impure so is not anathema to ZION. Another of Yellowman’s defenses of slackness is that we all come from sex. Sex is a divinely granted gift from Jah so to sing about it and celebrate it cannot be immoral or sinful.

A brief look at the relationship between Yellowman and Bob Marley can demonstrate a way to understand Yellowman’s ability to bind together the sexual and the spiritual. Yellowman first became seriously interested in Rastafari when he spent time at Marley’s 56 Hope Road residence in the late seventies. As a friend of Marley’s bassist, Aston “Familyman” Barrett, Yellowman was able to hang around Marley’s inner circle, largely made up of dreads. The close proximity to Marley had a significant impact on

Yellowman and the Marley connection is an important one for contextualizing Yellowman's Babylon/Zion dualism. Marley is most certainly an ad hoc spiritual mentor for Yellowman, Yellowman finds spiritual sustenance in Marley's songs and life example, but it is his combined religious and musical legacy that has affected Yellowman most. Marley is the king of reggae and the world's most famous Rastafarian, the man who globalized the religion virtually singlehandedly. Within reggae royalty Yellowman has come to see himself as a second Bob Marley, a title that others have bestowed on him for his contribution to globalizing dancehall. In "Poco Jump" Yellowman situates himself next to Marley, the two reggae musicians who have been crowned "Me no see no deejay fe take my crown. They never take Bob Marley crown." Bolstered by the fact that he was called the king of deejays or the king of dancehall as early as 1982, Yellowman takes seriously his role in the Jamaican musical pantheon next to Marley.

But what is especially interesting for this study is how Yellowman's worldview and message dovetails with Marley's and particularly how Yellowman has come to frame his own music as part of a Marleyian discourse on Rastafari, purity and Zion. Both artists seamlessly dealt with the overtly sexual and blatantly spiritual in their music and both were heavily criticized in their heyday by polite society for contesting value-norms. Like Yellowman's, Marley's music not only critiqued mainstream society, it also offered solutions for the *sufferahs* living within that constrictive society. Marley's solutions were multiple: the end goal was to overthrow Babylon, a feat accomplished through faith in Selassie as the living God. Involved in this was activism in the form of standing up for your rights and chanting down Babylon—in short staying proud and strong in the face of oppression and maintaining the livity. And what does Marley prescribe to do in the

meantime, to alleviate the pain of systemic racism, poverty and inequality? According to Dawes (2002) Marley's invocations to play music and dance (in "Dem Belly Full" and "One Drop" respectively) are far more revolutionary than they first appear. Dance for Marley is not a secular act, particularly when he tells his audience to dance to "Jah music" "the dancer is worshipping Jah as he or she faces the hardships of life in the ghetto" (Dawes 2002, 125,126). Dancing here is not escapism but rather a ritual activity that invokes the power of the black God to solve problems. Similarly reggae music for Marley is a transformative force, able to beat down Babylon, awaken those lost to mental slavery and take the message of Rastafari around the world (Ibid )

For Yellowman the solution was similar but decidedly slacker. Fighting oppression and chanting down Babylon certainly play a role in Yellowman's music, as does faith in Jah and promotion of Afro-Jamaican culture and Pan-Africanism. But at the root of his worldview we find an aphorism that contains the pithy truth, the kernel of his prescription for a troubled society. For Yellowman the answer is sex.

I beg you throw down your knife and throw down your gun  
 Caw dis is our island in the sun  
 Just get one girl and go have some fun  
 Get one girl and go have some fun  
 And me a go nice up Jamdung  
 —Yellowman, "Stand Up For Your Rights"

Physical pleasure, exemplified here through the male centric instruction to "get one girl," is on one level the release that can calm society but on another level a celebratory act of the enjoyment of life, fashioned as the defiance of a tyrannical system that keeps the poor ghettoized. Contextualized with his other songs, sexuality as a weapon against Babylon is a pseudo-spiritual solution. Sexuality comes from Jah and it is through sexuality that we

reproduce—two of Yellowman’s most ardent defenses of slackness. Sexual pleasure is therefore natural, wholesome, divinely gifted and community-enhancing. Its opposite—celibacy, abstinence, barrenness—is decidedly anti-social in the Jamaican context. For Yellowman sex as a solution to transcend everyday oppression and hardship is a parallel with Marley’s spiritual-rituals of dancing and playing music. They are examples of spiritual embodiment in what Dawes has called the “pseudo-spiritual world of the dancehall” (Ibid , 124) and are consistent with the Rastafarian Babylon/Zion dichotomy that does not degrade the flesh.

The carnal mind lyric is salient because it subtly twists a traditional Christian worldview and refashions it as Afro-Jamaican. In a 1784 missionary tract a Christian missionary admonishes a Jamaican slave for having sexual relations with multiple women outside of matrimony and reminds the slave that “no fornicator shall enter the Kingdom of heaven”<sup>194</sup>. Directives like this one regarding entering the kingdom of heaven are found throughout the New Testament and this is, no doubt, where Yellowman and his musical forebears ultimately copied the lyric from. The New Testament authors were concerned with materialism (“It is easier for a camel to go through a needle’s eye, than for a rich man to enter into the Kingdom of God” (Matt 19:24 KJV)) and general wickedness (“Know ye not that the unrighteous shall not inherit the kingdom of God?” (1 Cor 6:9 KJV)), but unlike Yellowman their major preoccupation was with a theology of the body as a vessel of sin. The King James Version of 1 Corinthians 6:9 bars not only fornicators and adulterers but also the effeminate. The New International Version translates this same passage as “neither the sexually immoral nor idolaters nor adulterers nor male prostitutes nor homosexual offenders” shall enter the kingdom of heaven.

---

<sup>194</sup> Found in LaFont 2001, note 1. Unknown author.

Presumably Yellowman is riffing on this adage, offering a dub version of it, if you will. But in Yellowman's version fornication and adultery are perfectly acceptable in Zion, as his usage of carnal removes the taint of sin from the body. Of course, sexual propriety must be maintained for the body to remain pure, meaning that for Yellowman proper sexual conduct following an Afro-Caribbean creole sexual respectability must be observed. As such, fornication is fine, prostitution and homosexuality are not. But unlike in Christianity these sinful acts are not rooted in the body but rather in the inclination toward Babylon. In Christianity the body is *a priori* profane and contaminates the sacred. The same distinction is not made in Rastafari. Babylon itself is profane but the body, as long as it conforms to the livity, is sacralized.

### ***Slackness/Culture: A Perforated Dualism***

Zion represents purity, a realm without sin or contamination. I suggest that in Yellowman's worldview slackness and sexuality are neither sinful nor contaminating. The sexual body is still a pure body. The slack/culture dichotomy found in reggae mirrors this relationship. The dominant view is that slackness is antithetical to culture just as sexuality is in opposition to spirituality. But Yellowman continually perforates this dualism just as he collapses Christian dualism.

In the late eighties Josey Wales released a song called "Culture a Lick." The deejay's coupling of slackness and culture in the song was reminiscent of the Garden of Eden paradigm: slackness hides from culture ("slackness in di backyard hidin, hidin, hidin / Slackness in di backyard hidin, hidin from culture"). The popularly represented oppositional values of these two ideologies are further demonstrated on the *Slackness*

*Versus Pure Culture* bootleg of a Yellowman and Charlie Chaplin concert in Negril But in reality slackness does not hide—dancehall has brought it out in the open—and it is not in total opposition to culture Another of Yellowman’s favourite lyrics, repeated in several songs, suggests either the futility of the Eden paradigm or refutes its application “You coulda never hide from Jah / You get away from man but you no get away from Jah” (“Can’t Hide From Jah”) Jah is ever-present so it is futile to try and hide Similarly, slackness could never hide from culture even if it tried Further to this, there is no need to hide sex from Jah, a believer who is Zion-inclined has nothing to fear Yellowman, obviously believing that he is conforming to the livity, is guided by Jah in all he does and sings, including slackness

You coulda never hide from Jah  
 You know why?  
 Caw I love Jah Rastafari  
 Caw everywhere I go a Jah a guide I  
 No matter wha you do I say no matter wha you try  
 No matter wha you do I say no matter wha you try  
 A Jah Jah a guide I  
 A Jah Jah a keep me  
 Jah Jah over me him a rule over me  
 Jah Jah over me him a rule over me  
 —Yellowman, “Can’t Hide From Jah”

The “can’t hide from Jah” lyric is also found in “Step it Outta Babylon” and “Morning Ride ” In the former Yellowman waits for impending salvation from Babylon by the hand of Jah He has a vision of Selassie “and his angels” traversing the River Jordan bringing love and freedom to “me black brother and sister” and abolishing war Based on the spiritual “Swing Low Sweet Chariot,” “Step it Outta Babylon” furthers the binary of Babylon/Zion where Babylon is the land of captivity and violence and Zion is the realm of peace, freedom, love and Selassie

But perhaps it is in “Morning Ride” that this lyric best demonstrates Yellowman’s view that sexuality does not need to be cordoned off from spirituality. The pairing is a shrewd but subtle commentary on the Garden of Eden incident. Yellowman recorded two versions of “Morning Ride,” a song that duplicitously uses the title of a popular morning radio program that was hosted by Fay Ellington as double entendre. His earlier version, recorded for Channel One and released on *Mister Yellowman*, includes blatant slackness that details the sexual positions Yellowman would like to perform with Ellington. The second version, his attempt at cleaning up the song for his critics, removes this section but is arguably more offensive because it maintains its sexual connotation and adds several elements of “pure culture.” Originally recorded over the “Rougher Yet” riddim (also known as “Love Bump” after Lone Ranger’s pseudo-slackness song), the second version employed the far more culturally credible “Black Disciples” riddim, named for Burning Spear’s song of the same name. Yellowman wanted to display his cultural credentials on this track so he added the following lyrics:

I say you coulda never hide from Jah  
 Cho man you coulda never hide from Jah  
 Is only Jah is my meditator  
 Is only Jah give I strength and power  
 Is only Jah Earth rightful ruler  
 Is only Jah give I strength and power  
 — Yellowman, “Morning Ride” (version 2)

This version represented the “clean” version yet still was overwhelmingly about sex. The “ride” in the title was a blatant allusion to intercourse and anyone who had heard the previous version would be aware that the song was a “sweetly smutty ode to JBC Radio broadcaster Fay Ellington” (Stelfox n.d.). The inclusion of the religious verse in this

context demonstrates Yellowman's belief that culture and slackness are not mutually exclusive. Taken together, the "carnal mind" and "can't hide" lyrics present us with a moral position that does not dichotomize sex and religion or the physical and spiritual. The Babylon/Zion binary divides the world into two realms but does not relegate the body or sexuality to a place of hiding from culture.

Notably, while society took offense to Yellowman's slackness, there is little evidence that the same can be said for Rastafarians. Some Rastas did frown on Yellowman's open slackness—Peter Tosh famously derided Yellowman's song "Shorties" as demeaning against women—but Yellowman's slackness shares the same life affirming and sex-positive morality as the Afro-Caribbean religion (Huey n d). His slackness, apart from the promotion of condoms as a means to keep the body disease free, was and is always in keeping with creole sexuality. Slackness across dancehall is very often about breeding, producing children and having families with many songs about "9 month belly" or pregnant lovers.

Beth Lesser: By being slack it sounds like he [Yellowman] is outside of some cultural norm but in fact he isn't because all of his slackness is within the culturally accepted norms. He's not advocating anything shocking, he's simply talking about adult sexuality. Yes, Jamaica is a very conservative culture but if you go back into mento and all the folk music and the African roots where sexuality is much more accepted and looked upon as life affirming and a positive thing, the censorship, it's very family-oriented heterosexual sexuality. It's not anything kinky or weird really. (Lesser 2009)

Rather than Rastafarian morality giving way to a hedonistic slackness in the eighties, slackness was in part derived from Rastafarian and rural Jamaican ideologies of sexuality. As such slackness does not always offer a critique of Rastafarian sexual ethics, but often is informed by those very sexual ethics.

Throughout his career Yellowman has had the opportunity to chat on all the major

Jamaican soundsystems, including two of the main “culture” sounds U Roy’s Stur-Gav and the Twelve Tribes of Israel’s Jah Love. Jah Love was home to Brigadier Jerry, one of the island’s most popular deejays in the late seventies and early eighties. When Yellowman was a guest on these two sounds it was expected that he would not chat slackness and he had no trouble complying. Sometimes he would be told to keep it clean by U-Roy before a show, but for the most part he was aware of the unwritten policy against slackness. During a conversation with some of Jah Love’s contemporary deejays in February 2010 at the Twelve Tribes of Israel headquarters, I asked them about the politics and optics of a slackness deejay chatting on a culture sound. Was it odd that the King of Slack deejayed on Jah Love? These deejays—Culture Dan, Pampí Judah, Rashorní and Natty Field Marshall—presented three arguments that I see as representative of the Rastafarian view on sexuality. First, slackness and songs about sex are not bad in and of themselves. Second, they contain adult content and as such there is an appropriate time and place for their performance. The Jah Love soundsystem prides itself on being a family-oriented soundsystem and so deejays should not chat slackness when they are guests of Jah Love. Third, artists have to make a living. Slackness sells and therefore if an artist chooses to chat slackness to make themselves financially successful, they should not be looked down upon.

### ***Chapter Conclusion***

Charting the terrain of the slackness/culture discourse is confusing because artists like Yellowman often shift what they mean when they speak of slackness, just as the term culture will connote different meanings to different readers. Slackness is short-hand for

sex lyrics, but as used in society also implies general impropriety. Slackness is something harmful to the community or anti-social and while society applies this to vulgarity and sexuality, Yellowman does not. For him slackness is poor government, poverty and disenfranchisement. As such Yellowman might say variously that a) sex lyrics are not slack—because he does not believe sex to be an inappropriate topic of conversation, b) sex lyrics are slack—when he adopts the discursive device of society to speak of sexuality, or c) that what is really slack are lyrics and actions that fall outside the tightly defined rubric of creole sexuality (i.e. sodomy) and activities that he deems are deconstructive to society, such as government corruption.

Yellowman [Slackness is] government not doing what they supposed to do, like help education, help the youths, help the children, the woman, the unwanted pregnancy, the street people. Fix the road. They do nothing, that is slackness.

The ongoing “battle” between slackness and culture that is a common theme of reggae songs, albums, concerts and even artist typologies is really not a battle at all, though sources often depict it that way. The *Official Dancehall Dictionary* follows several sources in defining culture over and against slackness. “The cultural DJ deals with *livity* and *up-fullness*—he (*sic*) avoids the usage of slackness lyrics and basically sees himself as part of the musical process promoting social consciousness, awareness, and change” (Francis-Jackson 1995, 191). Francis-Jackson further explicates the categories of slackness and culture and shows how they are imagined in dancehall culture. The slackness deejay, he says “sees himself as a social commentator. On the other hand, the cultural DJ operates as a social activist—a vehicle for change.” Despite Francis-Jackson’s attempt to maintain a duality the case of Yellowman, and deejays that follow him who mix the slackness and cultural tropes, cannot be contained within these stringent barriers.

Yellowman sees himself as a social commentator and a social activist

Hope's (2006) typology of deejays is helpful for looking at the thematic array of songs in dancehall but still is based on a slack/culture dichotomy. Yellowman fits two categories here, according to Hope, the "girls dem deejay" and the "slackness deejay." Yet Yellowman has attempted throughout his career to break down these categories. That he can deejay either slackness or culture is the subject of several recurring lyrics. Here he is concerned with showing his critics that he is more than a slackness deejay and, in the manner of an astute businessman, is trying to widen this popular appeal to increase his market share. But in doing so he always demonstrates what I see as his implicit agenda to perforate the culture/slackness antinomy, and the fleshly/spiritual binary, while projecting a Rasta-centric value system. Several songs deal with this agenda:

Ah true man, me a change the style, haffi change the style  
 Well, right now we gone South Africa right now  
 Cause nuff people think say Yellowman can't chat culture and all them ting  
 Me is a deejay mix everything. When me rude me get rude  
 And when me don't want get rude me don't get rude, seen?  
 —Yellowman, introduction to "Galong/Gone A South Africa/Jah  
 Me Fear"<sup>195</sup>

When me take up the mic me started to chat  
 Me chat the culture me naw go chat no slack  
 —Yellowman, "King of the Crop"

Favourite colour man it yellow and black  
 Sometime me culture sometime me slack  
 Know 'bout me Bible know me scripture  
 Know 'bout me roots also me culture  
 Deejay fe baldhead and Rasta  
 —Yellowman, "Under Me Fat Ting"

The drive to define reggae as either slack or culture comes directly out of the European Christian derived dualistic mindset. The splitting of the sexual and spiritual, the

---

<sup>195</sup> From the live album *Negril Chill*

body and mind, is an artificial construct in Jamaica adopted by the upper classes and many Christians but actively and dynamically contested regularly in dancehall. Yellowman's constant collapsing of slack and culture is an example of his denial of Christian dualism. The sacred and profane are not poles separated by a great distance in Jamaican culture. There is a continuum, to be sure, and each artist negotiates their comfort level along that continuum.

For Yellowman his lyrics, performances and life illustrate his ability to practice embodied spirituality and, ultimately, the sacralizing of sexuality. This is manifested in a) his definition of sexuality as "reality" instead of sin, b) his insistence that sex is a gift from Jah, and that only through the holy act of procreation we all exist, c) his insistence that sex should not be hidden from Jah, d) his utilization of an Afrocentric model of wholeness that refutes Christian duality, and e) his mobilization of the Rastafarian Babylon/Zion binary and its allowance for the purified body in Zion. Finally then, Yellowman maintains that slackness is not against culture, slackness is culture.

## CHAPTER 5

# CONCLUSION

This project has contested the dominant way Yellowman has been understood and constructed in popular media and scholarship and has offered a contextualized reading of his music by situating him in his historical, social, political, religious and cultural background. I have sought to position his music in relation to the ethnos—the community and culture that he is part of. This has meant researching his life story, as it is integral to understanding how his slackness, for instance, could function to help overturn the pariah status he was born with as a black albino in Jamaica during the middle of the twentieth century.

I have mentioned throughout the dissertation that for Yellowman slackness is first and foremost about entertainment; he takes his role as an entertainer very seriously and loves to please an audience. This no doubt stems from his youth spent ostracized, relegated to the fringes of society, and also financial concerns—slackness sells and allowed Yellowman to become the world's top reggae deejay. However, after researching Yellowman's life and music I believe there are several nuances to his slackness that are generally overlooked, even, perhaps, by Yellowman himself. Yellowman routinely used slackness to make moral points and conceived of slackness as an entirely respectable theme for an upstanding spiritually minded member of society. As such I have framed this dissertation by offering four ways to theorize the presence of slackness and culture in Yellowman's music.

Yellowman's slackness, while cruder and more blatant than his predecessors, was

firmly rooted in Caribbean literary and music traditions. In Section II I outlined a history of slackness in Caribbean music and demonstrated how Yellowman's dancehall music was an extension of the Caribbean practice of using slackness to undermine the dominant society dating back through mento and calypso to earlier slave-era songs. In Section III Chapter 1 I focused on how slackness allowed Yellowman to wrest his representation as an albino pariah away from dominant society and revalorize the dundus as an object of sexual desire. I argued that through slackness Yellowman subverted normative notions of sexuality, gender, race and beauty by promoting the albino as sexually appealing and hyper-masculine, as having blackness yet at times trumping blackness in favour of yellowness. Second, I provided an examination of how Yellowman was subjected to racist and classist social biases that denied the dundus African and Jamaican nationhood. Here I theorized that slackness was a methodology that Yellowman employed to adopt stereotypical depictions of black hypersexuality and masculinity for the purposes of including himself in the black nation.

Chapter 2 examined how Yellowman's sexual lyrics were an example of Obika Gray's thesis that slackness was a conscious political project employed by the underclasses in Jamaica to contest the normative values that the dominant society had laid claim to in their definition of proper Jamaicanness. Yellowman's slackness, then, was more than simply crowd pleasing antics but functioned as an activist platform to contest the moral sway of the upper classes. In this chapter I also provided a detailed examination of how Yellowman's image has been constructed and maintained in the media and the scholarly literature as the King of Slack, a two-dimensional caricature that ignores the political and religious discourses at work in his material. Here I used Yellowman to

demonstrate what I see as the inclination to conceive of a de-evolution of reggae music based on European moral and musical values that are predicated on the belief that social and political critique are absent from slack music

Chapter 3 argued that one of the main functions of Yellowman's slackness was for the purposes of moral regulation whereby he espoused a correct morality using, at times, extremely lascivious lyrics to demean dominant Christian attitudes toward sexuality such as monogamy, sex as sinful behaviour and the impurity of the body. He also contested liberal non-Jamaican sexualities and practices such as homosexuality and oral sex. Yellowman instead espoused conservative Afro-Jamaican sexual ethics and interpreted his *morés* through his understanding of Rastafarian morality. He used the Jamaican discursive device of tracing to trace his opponents' moral transgressions, bolster his own normative representation in the public's eyes, and model for society moral sexual behaviour based on a rubric of creole sexual ethics. Here I challenged the dominant view that dancehall in the eighties was characterized by the loss of moral sway on the part of Rastafarians and argued that Rastafari does not share Christianity's austere sexual morality but instead has room for lascivious and public expressions of positive sexuality through dancehall music. Artists such as Yellowman that saw themselves as both slack and Rastafarian were able to maintain a moral agenda through their slackness.

Finally, Chapter 4 addressed the sacred-profane continuum in Yellowman's music that I argue perforates the traditional western Christian body-spirit dualism in favour of a Rastafarian model that privileges the body. I contextualized Yellowman's slackness in non-dualistic African-derived ideologies of the body and religion and demonstrated that by putting sex and religion, or slackness and culture, side by side Yellowman undermined

colonial binary categories in favour of an Afrocentric model of wholeness. I focused here on the Rastafarian oppositional relationship of Babylon/Zion to show how the body and sex in Yellowman's music are not anathema to Zion or the spiritual realm. In this chapter I interrogated the meaning of the word carnal in Yellowman's music and argued that carnality is badmindedness, materialism and impurity but not sexuality or slackness. Instead Yellowman consecrates slackness, exults sexuality and extols embodied spirituality implicitly by continually mingling the slack and culture themes in his music. In doing so he perforates the sacred/profane binary and the slackness/culture dichotomy.

In conclusion, I suggest that in the case of Yellowman the overt political and religious nature of some of his songs and the fact that he is a Rastafarian mean that his "slackness" is more than just a revolt against mainstream morality and normative ideas of gender and sexuality, it is informed by Rastafarian ideologies of sexuality and anti-colonial resistance. In other words, Yellowman's "slack" lyrics are derived from a Rastafarian understanding of how to subvert colonial Christian society. Whereas Cooper (1995) suggests that "slackness" is the antithesis of culture, I argue that for Yellowman the slack/culture dichotomy is eroded when slackness becomes part of the religious repertoire of resistance against mainstream society. Slackness, therefore, becomes culture.

Since Yellowman began his career in the late seventies, the controversy over slackness in reggae has only grown but so has the ability of reggae artists to blur the lines between slackness and culture. Sizzla, Capleton, and Buju Banton are all popular dancehall deejays that routinely do this. Writing about Banton's 1997 switch from slack dancehall lyrics to Rastafarian dancehall, or what she calls "conscious vibes" on his *'Til*

*Shiloh* album, Saunders says

The line separating these two forms of music (conscious vibes and dancehall music) is not at all solid. While Bujū's music has taken a notably different turn, much of the anti-Western, anticolonial and antigay sentiment remains but is veiled in ethical, moral, and religious discourses that are part of the conscious vibes brand of reggae music (Saunders 2003, 96)

For Banton, a conversion to Rastafari did not mean that he was done with slackness, he still sings about sex regularly

### ***Slackness as a Tactic for Resistance***

The four models to theorize Yellowman's slackness mentioned above are each ways to look at slackness as a tactic of resistance against any power that oppressed or was seen to oppress the artist (the church, the government, the upper classes, and so on). Permissiveness in the music of Yellowman has always functioned in a multivalent fashion to both entertain and critique. Just as Yellowman engaged in entertainment, he also engaged in "discourses of resistance," to borrow a term from Pauline Saunders (2003). Yellowman's use of slackness in his music can be understood as a sexual discourse of resistance and has a parallel with the blues (Douglas 1999). The blues allowed newly emancipated blacks the chance to sing about their sexuality and sexual themes such as homosexuality, domestic violence and intimacy—something they could not do during slavery. "Sovereignty in sexual matters marked an important divide between life during slavery and life after emancipation" (Davis 1998, 4, Douglas 1999). The blues allowed blacks to control their own representation in sexual matters, tell their own stories and was a vehicle for self-expression. By not recognizing societal taboos, the blues crossed

boundaries and gave voice to sentiments that were morally repugnant to mainstream society and the black bourgeoisie (Davis 1998, Douglas 1999)

Yellowman's slackness functioned the same way offering self-expression and sexual freedom to the black underclasses in the decades after independence. Theorizing sexuality as a locale of resistance LaFont (2001) points out that the planter class had little control over the sex lives of their slaves, and so sexuality was one area that enslaved Africans could exercise autonomy. While they were subject to sexual exploitation they were also able to negotiate the sexual ethics they adopted by not accepting them completely and uncritically. And by shunning traditional dualism Afro-Jamaicans were able to maintain an Afrocentric integrated embodied spirituality.

Slack artists continue this rubric of sex as resistance. Yellowman, by publicizing sex-positive and body-positive creole *morés* in the face of Christian austerity, promoted an integrated African worldview over a dualistic western view. Yellowman's sexual discourse of resistance is also inherent in his combating of racial stereotypes and promotion of self-esteem among albinos and blacks.

### ***Areas for Further Research***

First, in this dissertation I have situated Yellowman's sexual ethics in Rastafarian attitudes toward sexuality but not in Rastafarian sexual ethics directly. This is because there is currently no in-depth research into Rastafarian sexual ethics to tell us exactly what they are, their range or scope, the diversity of beliefs among Rastas and how they differ from Christianity, Afro-Christianity and creole sexual *morés*. Scholars have either uncritically collapsed Rastafarian sexual ethics with Afro-Christian *morés* (Stolzoff 2000)

or, more typically generalized an African sexual-positive worldview without providing much evidence of this (Cooper 1995, 2004) I have based my research on how slackness and Rastafari have been negotiated in reggae culture, Yellowman's own ideas of what it means to be a Rastafarian, interviews with other reggae artists about Rastafari and slackness, and the scant literature available on this topic As such, I make no assumption that Yellowman's sexual ethics are the same as the broader Rastafarian community, I do, however, believe that they are in keeping with what Rastafari espouses and practices What needs to occur though is sustained ethnographic research into Rastafarian sexual ethics

Second, I trust that the final scholarly word on Yellowman has not been written He is an artist that divided a country—once wildly popular among the youth and dancehall audience yet despised by polite society—and the complexity of discourses in his music, as well as surrounding his music and person, mean that further academic inquiry is needed to more fully understand him and early dancehall culture His contribution to reggae and to Jamaican culture is immense yet scholars have largely ignored him His musical borrowings and innovations in the song “Zungguzungguguzungguzeng” have been the subject of one scholar's research (Marshall 2007), but Yellowman's vast catalogue has for the most part escaped critical engagement by the scholarly community It is a mixed blessing for reggae, Rastafari and Jamaica that Bob Marley's fame has reached such heights because it means that scholarly energies have most often been applied to Marley at the expense of other artists, Rastafarians and Jamaicans I have focused on slackness and culture in Yellowman's music, and have largely drawn from his material released in the seventies and eighties, but to the detriment

of other important topics. For instance, I have only touched the surface of Yellowman's views on and treatment of women in his songs. In the life story (Section II) I mention that many writers, and Yellowman himself, see a life change occur after his first cancer scare in 1984 that resulted in the toning down of his slackness. While I do deal with this there I have not included it in my analytical chapters, partly because I do not think it is an accurate representation of his material. Some of Yellowman's slackest material occurs after this and even though he began to release more cultural and religiously minded records, he never strayed from singing about sex. A good example of this is the year 1995 in which he released both *Yellowman's Good Sex Guide* and *Message to the World*.

However, a deeper look into this period of his life (1990 forward) is warranted and a rich discussion could result from his usage of Christian imagery during this time. I have only briefly touched on what Prothero (1996) calls religious liberalism—an ideology that seeks to erase boundaries between religions, preferring to conceive of one universal God—in regards to Yellowman's life, but I think this is a suitable rubric for approaching a phenomenon that I believe has developed in Rastafari over the last two decades. What began as an oppositional movement to Christianity has, for many practitioners, become a virtual denomination of the religion. This is inherent in the movement's close affiliation with the Ethiopian Orthodox Church (Chevannes 1999), as well as Christian tone of many Rastafarian reggae artists (Garnet Silk, Yabby You and Toots Hibbert for instance), and the fact that many Rastafarians promote religious liberalism. Further research needs to be conducted into these recent changes in the movement, particularly as it moves around the globe and takes root in new cultural contexts.

## Appendix 1: Glossary

Ambition self-respect

Babylon all oppressive systems of the world, also the non-African world

Backra or buckra white man

Baldhead a person without dreadlocks, also a non-Rasta

Battyman, battybwoy homosexual man

Boasy boastful

Bomboclaat, bumboklaat literally means sanitary napkin but is translated as  
“motherfucker”

Bow to perform oral sex

Brawta bonus

Bredren brethren, friend, peer

Bruk to meet up with

Bun burn

Bwoy, bwai boy

Carnal for Yellowman carnal means “badness” and includes the material realm but does  
not connote sexuality

Chat to deejay or rap

Culture this term is used in reggae to depict music that is lyrically and thematically  
aligned with Afrocentric biblical exegesis, Ethiopianism, Ital Livity, Jahworks, a  
view of Haile Selassie as God and/or the second coming of Christ, repatriation to  
Zion/Ethiopia, celebrations of African culture and history, songs calling for Babylon  
to be chanted down, theocratic political critiques of Babylon’s machinations, black  
nationalism, and a concern for the “sufferahs,” or underclasses

Cuss-cuss cuss or curse

Dat, deh that, there

Deejay rapper or talk over artists

Deso there (from *yaso* to *deso* from here to there)

Dweet do it

Dundus black albino, a term of derision The term can be used to used describe a specific dark skin/light hair phenotype and the connotation is that this represents an unnatural phenotype, thus a dundus is considered a freak of nature

Duppy ghost

Facey rude or impertinent, also refers to scabs on the skin

Favour to resemble

F1 / fe for

Galong go on, get lost

Gwaan go on

Haffi have to

Inna in a (in this fashion)

Ital “natural,” ital can encompass Rastafarian culture by implicating diet, lifestyle or speech

Jahworks deeds that either promote or are prescribed by Jah and Rastafari

Jamdung Jamaica

Likkle little

Livity nature living, living according to Rastafari precepts

Mama man or maama-man homosexual (literally “mother's man”)

Mogel to model, pose or show off

Mek make

Nuff enough, lots

Nuh no, not, none, nothing

Nyam to eat

Ongle only

Ooman woman

Picong stinging, insulting

Punanny, Pum Pum vagina

Ray ray and so on

Reasoning a dialogical discussion between two or more Rastas

Riddim musical backing track / rhythm / drum and bass line

Selector Soundsystem employee that spins records

Signifying boasting

Shotta shooter, meaning gangster

Slack Slackness, at least in reference to Yellowman, refers to lyrics centred on masculine heterosexual potency, sexist objectification of women and graphic sexual narratives  
“Slackness” carries a connotation of impropriety or transgression of the moral order

Sodomite lesbian or any homosexual person

Sodomy any sexual practice that goes against creole sexual respectability

Soundsystem or sound mobile deejay businesses that play records for dances

’Tan pon it long stay or stand upon it long In other words, last long in bed

Tracing a Caribbean argumentative tactic where one party traces the moral shortcomings of their rival

Version iterations of popular reggae songs using the same riddim but different singers (or even different bands) Originally the “version” of a song meant its dub or instrumental version Today, a version could be any rerecorded version of a song

Whey what or where

Yaso there

Zion a sort of real-time heaven, part physical part spiritual, situated in Ethiopian and/or Africa though its geographic locale is overlaid with Biblical terrain

## Appendix 2: Song Translations

In this appendix I offer my own translations of many of Yellowman's lyrics that I quote in this dissertation. I have chosen only the songs that may be difficult to understand for readers not acquainted with reggae or Jamaican patois. I am somewhat reluctant to translate these songs because I believe that they should be engaged with in their own language, meanings and contexts are lost by translating them to into standard English. As such, I do not intend for these translation to stand on their own apart from my analysis of them in the text.

### **"Life Story"** (*quoted on page 58*)

I'm going to tell you my life story  
 When I did bad my mother disowned me  
 My mother said, "Lord what an ugly baby"  
 One time I didn't have any money  
 I had only one pair of pants and they were full of patches  
 Squidly and Welton Irie  
 When I walk down the street they would laugh after me  
 Some people walk and talk and some of them scorn me  
 And some of them talk about flies follow me  
 And some of them say, "He smells funny, eee"  
 But now I turn a man and turn an emcee  
 The girls are all after me  
 They don't love me just because of my deejay money

### **"King of the Crop"** (*quoted on pages 71, 123, 402*)

When I take up the mic and start to chat  
 I tell you Yellowman is the king of the crop  
 Anytime I chat the crowd has to rock

If I try to reach the top they want to see Yellowman drop  
 And if Yellow doesn't try at all they say that I slip and fall  
 Because Yellowman chat it after all by Saint Peter by Saint Paul

When I take up the mic and start to chat  
 I chat the culture I'm not going to chat slack

### **"Gunman"** (*quoted on pages 120, 282*)

Gunman, say tell me where you get your gun from?  
 You must of got it from the foreign land  
 You want to come and shoot down your own black man

Gunshot it no respect no one  
 It kill soldier man, it kill police man  
 It kill police man, also badman  
 It kill badman, also civilian

It kill civilian, also Christian  
It kill animal, also human

Gunman, tell me where you get your gun from  
You must've gotten it from the foreign land  
You must think I'm a politician  
You don't know I'm a musician

**“Who Can Make the Dance Ram?”** (*quoted on page 125*)

Who can pack the dance floor? Who can pack the dance floor?  
Who can make it jammed? Who can make it jammed?  
No other deejay in this island, only Yellowman can, the number one  
Who can make the dub play? Who can make the dub play?  
Night and day, night and day  
No other sound in this island only my sound can, the champion

**“Girls Pet”** (*quoted on page 145*)

I want you to know that Yellowman is the girls' pet  
And boy, Yellowman gets a lot of woman

**Even Tide Fire** (*quoted on page 166*)

Why does the wicked man pressure the poor man?  
Eventide Home is burning down  
I couldn't stand the pressure

**Nobody Move** (*quoted on pages 174, 204*)

The things I used to do I'm not going to do anymore  
Because the year it changed to '84

The Rastaman doesn't eat beef and he doesn't eat dirt  
He comes from the planet of earth  
He comes from the planet of earth  
Granny's in the kitchen cooking rice and chicken  
The Rastaman is outside the door cooking natural stew  
Don't trouble granny because granny never troubles you  
The Rastaman cooks up his natural stew

**Soldier Take Over** (*quoted on page 182*)

The soldiers take over  
Take over the whole of Jamaica  
They show off in their jeep and tank

I say look out, look out the soldiers are coming  
They're looking for the gangsters who fire their guns  
And if you don't run they will shoot you to the ground

On my way to Up Park Camp  
 I met up with a jeep loaded full of soldiers  
 They said, "Come here boy, you look like a gunman"  
 You're an idiot boy, my name is Yellowman  
 He said, "Shut your mouth before you feel my Remington"  
 He kicked away my foot and he punched me in my face  
 He punched me in my face and he kicked away my foot  
 He said, "Red boy I don't love how you look"

**Funky Reggae Party** *(quoted on pages 189-190)*

Watch the one in the shorts  
 Watch how the girl gyrates her buttocks  
 I don't know if she has any underwear on

Watch the one in the pants  
 That one she comes from Portland  
 That one I know is an Indian  
 That one must love Yellowman  
 When I'm done deejaying she going to give me romance

Watch the one in the frock  
 That girl wants my cock  
 Watch the one in the white  
 That one is a damn lesbian  
 I heard that she can't boil a pot of rice  
 Everyday she gets up and fusses and fights  
 The girl uses the acid and knife

Watch the girl in the red  
 She feels up my two testicles as if I have four legs  
 Watch the girl in the red  
 Lay down upon the bed and open your legs  
 Lay down upon the bed and open your legs  
 I tell you little girl I'm going to push in my leg

Come off of the road make the dance overload  
 Come off of the street make the dance sweet  
 Your boss deejay at the mic emcee  
 You don't know that my name is Mr Sexy

**"Fools go to Church"** *(quoted on page 193)*

The apostle at the pulpit tells pure lies  
 He dresses up in a jacket he dresses up in a tie  
 He tells you great God is coming from the sky  
 I tell you Yellowman knows that's a lie  
 I tell you the truth I tell you no lie

You can't go to Zion with your ammunition  
 You can't hide from Jah  
 You can't never hide from Jah  
 You get away from man but you can't get away from Jah  
 You get away from man but you can't get away from Jah  
 You walk through the jungles of Africa  
 You open the Bible and read a chapter  
 Started to chant up the roots and culture  
 Tell it to the brothers and I tell it to the sisters

**“Jah Jah Made Us for a Purpose”** (*quoted on pages 231, 237*)

There's one thing that Yellowman can't understand  
 What makes everybody cuss me about my nationality?  
 They talk about where did I get my colour from  
 It's a pity they don't know it's from the whole a one

I want everybody to understand  
 Jah Jah made us for a purpose  
 He made the Yellowman for a purpose  
 He made the Chinese man for a purpose  
 He made the black man for a purpose

**“Weed Dem”** (*quoted on page 234*)

I tell you black people they know about Jesus  
 Back in the slavery days we know about that  
 When the white man controlled everything that we had  
 We used to wear their clothes we used to feed their hog  
 We used to go to church and praise the white man God

My name is Yellowman and look at my complexion  
 You know I am the true Rastaman  
 Selassie I I praise and you know I don't stray  
 He guided me through twenty-two years  
 All of my success all of my glory he gave me all my fame

**“Sit Under You”** (*quoted on page 245*)

I'm going to tell you why the girls they love the yellow body  
 When I ejaculate, I ejaculate honey  
 Yellowman with the modern body

**“Zungguzungguguzungguzeng”** (*quoted on page 246*)

Because enough of them say that I don't have a girlfriend  
 You're an idiot boy, I have a hundred and ten  
 Say all of them have yellow children

**“Girlfriend”** (quoted on page 246)

I’m going to see out of me or all the other men  
 Which one of us has the most girlfriends  
 I have girls over there, girl over here  
 Girl up there and girl down there  
 Say east, west, north and south wherever I go  
 From Texas to Colorado  
 From L A to San Diego  
 From ’Frisco down to Mexico  
 From New York to Toronto  
 Not to mention Puerto Rico  
 Back to Aruba and Curacao  
 The girls all love me from my head to my toe

**“Yellowman a the Lover Boy”** (quoted on page 246)

Look how she’s fat Yellow has control over her  
 You look upon my head you see my hair has plaits  
 There was 125 girls that did that

**“Bubble With Me Ting”** (quoted on page 248)

When I roll out my Yellow something  
 The girl look at me and say it’s a goddamn sin  
 Your Yellow something could never go in

**“Wreck a Pum Pum”** (quoted on page 248)

I take down my pants, down to me knee  
 She looks under me and says “God almighty”  
 Yellowman are you going use that thing on me?  
 I said “shut your mouth it is only 10 feet”

**“Mad Over Me”** (quoted on pages 250-251)

They left their men to come to Yellowman  
 Not because of my complexion but because I have ambition / self-respect

They see me on the road, they laugh after me  
 Some of them say that I’m too ugly  
 Some of them say that I’m too boastful  
 A man like me should be in the cemetery  
 The next one says that I’m too impertinent  
 They start to ask why the girls want me  
 Because I’m sexy, I’m sexy

**“Cocky did a Hurt Me”** (quoted on page 255)

They go on like they’re slack but I’m slacker then them  
 Yellowman with the slackness again

**“Society Party”** (quoted on page 261)

They send a limousine with 10 police  
 To escort Yellowman up to the Intercontinental Hotel  
 I come out of the car police elude me  
 Seaga and Manley, they come to meet me  
 We sit around the table, Johnny Walker Whiskey  
 I start chat culture, roots and reality  
 Seaga get up with his wife Mitsy  
 And start with the (dance)style named Water Pumpee

**“Stand up for your Rights”** (quoted on page 282)

I beg you throw down your knife and throw down your gun  
 Because this is our island in the sun  
 Just get one girl and go have some fun  
 Just get one girl and go have some fun  
 I’m going to make Jamaica nice

**“Yellowman Getting Married”** (*Mad Over Me* version) (quoted on page 311)

I’m getting married in the morning  
 Ding dong you hear the church bell ring  
 She had my yellow baby and I’m gonna take care of it  
 So take me to the church on time

You gonna be my lawful wife  
 You gonna be my lawful wife  
 I’ll fry the chicken and you boil the rice

**“Yellowman Getting Married”** (from *Mister Yellowman*) (quoted on page 311)

My wife is a part of me life  
 My wife is a part of me life  
 Some are married and some are divorced  
 Some of them talk about married life too coarse  
 But tell you Yellowman is the one the girls love the most  
 For when it comes to deejaying on the mic Yellowman can toast

**“Which One Will Wear The Ring?”** (quoted on page 312)

I went to Haiti to find two ladies  
 And when I came back my babymother hated me  
 Which one of them will wear the ring

Now that the race is over and thing  
 I tell you none of them got the gold ring

**“Galong Galong Galong”** (quoted on pages 323-324)

I come to teach the truth and the right I don’t come to teach the wrong  
 You know me as an emcee I don’t come to sing a song

David slew Goliath and Sampson was strong  
He was a fool and was tricked by a woman  
Now I give thanks and praise to Jah the only one  
And due to Jah's protection I walk with no weapon  
But if I'm ever approached by a dirty Babylon (non-believer / policeman)  
All I need to do is chant Psalms 2, 3 and 21

I've got to scare the hell out of all Babylon  
Now I give thanks and praise to Jah the only one  
Now my age is 22 my age is not 21  
I only trust my wife I don't trust any other woman  
Some women like to tell me lies and some just love to con  
They say "it's you I love" and then they sleep with six other men

Some fly, go to Germany to make lots of money  
Out of the business they call prostitution  
They suck dead penis until it gets erect  
They don't remove their mouth until ejaculation  
Drink it down nice like a soup out of can  
All because they want a big rich car and diamond

Some of them spread their legs wide from here to Japan  
Play with their clitoris in front of cameraman  
That kind of woman has no ambition  
They pray for cash more than for their reputation

Well still I'm gonna change up my conversation  
Whether at my home, or at my microphone stand  
I tell you Yellowman come to tell everyone  
So if I sound slack I don't give a damn

Some of them have it in their intention  
To turn their back on Jah law, upon the Rastaman  
And shout out to everyone "I want to be a lesbian"  
Feel up one another with their fingers on their hand  
Suck down below for ten minutes long  
What the hell when the bitch her mouth get jammed  
The biblical days it did a goes on in Sodom  
But I tell you Yellowman knows that's wrong  
I don't want my children living in confusion  
I call on Jah law, I don't want your corruption  
You know Yellowman come to tell everyone  
Still you know I'm going to change up my conversation  
The biggest threat to man is the nuclear bomb  
And who rule Russia, America, England?  
If I had the chance I'd kill them one by one

Between who's crotch I'd plant an atom bomb  
 Blow their testicles from here to Taiwan  
 I'd go shoot the next one's titty with a M1  
 Fill her crotch's hole with radiation  
 I'd add abuse with a pump action gun  
 And throw the whole of them in an old dustpan  
 And tell the truck driver  
 Go on, get lost, far from here

**“Blow Saxophone”** (*quoted on page 340*)

I have sex on bed, upon the table  
 I kiss you on your lip, kiss you on your chin  
 Feel up your breast and lots of caress  
 But I don't pass the navel, me don't pass the navel

**“Care Your Body”** (*quoted on page 351*)

Kick out your foot if you don't use Ambi  
 And jump around you don't use Ambi  
 Shout it out you have a healthy body

**“Jah Me Fear”** (*quoted on page 359*)

Margie is a Jezebel, Reagan talks like queer  
 Him looks like a donkey, she likes to look at herself in the mirror  
 Only one dirty pair of panties Margie Thatcher loves to wear  
 Reagan acts like he's young but he has grey hair

**“AIDS”** (*quoted on page 377*)

Love is a serious thing don't take it for fun  
 When you meet a girl use a condom  
 Because this disease is going around  
 And this disease is putting us down  
 No exchange, no refund  
 Once you catch AIDS your life is done

**“Condom”** (*quoted on page 377*)

Before you make love today remember to use up the condom  
 The condom you say it's not made for every man  
 The condom you know is my secret weapon  
 The condom I use it up for protection  
 The condom you know is for all nations

**“Stand Up For Your Rights”** (*quoted on page 394*)

I beg you throw down your knife and throw down your gun  
 Because this is our island in the sun  
 Just get one girl and go have some fun  
 Get one girl and go have some fun

And I make Jamaica nicer

**“Can’t Hide From Jah”** (*quoted on page 397*)

You could never hide from Jah  
 You know why?  
 Because I love Jah Rastafari  
 Because everywhere I go Jah guides me  
 No matter what you do I say no matter what you try  
 No matter what you do I say no matter what you try  
 Jah Jah guides me  
 Jah Jah keeps me,  
 Jah Jah over me he rules over me  
 Jah Jah over me he rules over me

**“Morning Ride” (version 2)** (*quoted on page 398*)

I say you could never hide from Jah  
 Man you could never hide from Jah  
 Jah is my only meditator  
 Only Jah gives me strength and power  
 Only Jah is Earth’s rightful ruler  
 Only Jah gives me strength and power

**Introduction to “Galong/Gone A South Africa/Jah Me Fear”** (*quoted on page 402*)

It’s true man, I change the style, have to change the style  
 Well, right now we go to South Africa right now  
 Because lots of people think that Yellowman can’t chat culture and all them thing  
 I am a deejay that mix everything When I rude I get rude  
 And when I don’t want to get rude I don’t get rude, understand?

**“Under Me Fat Ting”** (*quoted on page 402*)

Favourite colour man it’s yellow and black  
 Sometimes I’m culture sometimes I’m slack  
 Know about my Bible know my scripture  
 Know about my roots also my culture  
 Deejay for baldhead and Rasta

## Referenced Works

- Abrahams, Roger D 1983 *Man-of-words in the West Indies Performance and the emergence of Creole culture* Baltimore Johns Hopkins University Press
- Adams, L Emilie, and Llewelyn Adams 1991 *Understanding Jamaican patois An introduction to Afro-Jamaican grammar* Kingston, Jamaica Kingston Publishers Limited
- Albanese, Catherine L 2007 *America, religions, and religion* 4th ed Australia, Belmont, CA Thomson/Wadsworth
- Alexander, M Jacqui 1997 Erotic Autonomy as a Politics of Decolonization An Anatomy of Feminist and State Practice in the Bahamas Tourist Economy In *Feminist Genealogies, Colonial Legacies, Democratic Futures*, edited by M J A a C T Mohanty London Routledge
- Alidou, Ousseina 2005 *Engaging modernity Muslim women and the politics of agency in postcolonial Niger* Madison, Wis University of Wisconsin Press
- Alpha Boys School 2009 Sister Ignatius Coaster Set, [accessed June 23 2009] Available from <http://www.alphaboysschool.com/coasters.htm>
- Alpha Boys School 2009 Sister Mary Ignatius Davies (1921-2003), [accessed June 16 2009] Available from [www.alphaboysschool.com/iggy.htm](http://www.alphaboysschool.com/iggy.htm)
- Allen, Karen 2008 Living in fear Tanzania's albinos BBC, July 21, [accessed September 25, 2010] Available from <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/africa/7518049.stm>
- Alleyne, Mervyn C 1988 *Roots of Jamaican culture* London Pluto
- 2005 *Construction and representation of race and ethnicity in the Caribbean and the world* Barbados University of the West Indies Press
- Allsopp, Richard, and Jeannette Allsopp 1996 *Dictionary of Caribbean English usage* Oxford Oxford University Press
- Anderson, Rick 2004 Reggae music A history and selective discography *Sound Recording Reviews* 61 (1) 206-125
- Appiah, Anthony 1992 *In my father's house Africa in the philosophy of culture* New York Oxford University Press
- Asad, Talal 1993 *Genealogies of religion discipline and reasons of power in Christianity and Islam* Baltimore Johns Hopkins University Press
- Austin-Broos, Diane J 1997 *Jamaica genesis Religion and the politics of moral orders*

Chicago University of Chicago Press

- Baker, Charlotte and Medard Djatou 2007 *Enduring negativity Literary and anthropological perspectives on the black African albino* In *Crossing places New research in African studies*, edited by Charlotte Baker and Zoe Norridge Newcastle Cambridge Scholars Publishing
- Bangs, Lester 2004 *Innocents of Babylon A search for Jamaica featuring Bob Marley and a cast of thousands* In *Everything little thing gonna be alright The Bob Marley reader*, edited by H Bordowitz Cambridge Da Capo
- Barkley, Captain 2009 Interview by author Kingston, February 24
- Barrow, Stephen and Paul Coote 2004 *Mento Madness* (liner notes) New York V2 Records
- Barrow, Stephen and Peter Dalton 2004 *The rough guide to reggae* 3 ed London Rough Guides
- Batra, Kanika 2010 "Our own gayful rest" A postcolonial archive *Small Axe* 14 (1) 46-59
- Beckford, Robert 2006 *Jesus dub Theology, music and social change* London, New York Routledge
- Benson, Paul J 1993 *Anthropology and literature* Urbana University of Illinois Press
- Beyer, Peter 2000 *Religion and Globalization* London Sage
- Blankenberg, Ngaire 2000 That rare and random tribe Albino identity in South Africa *Critical Arts* 14 (2) 6 (43)-49
- Blassingame, John W 1979 *The slave community Plantation life in the antebellum South* New York Oxford University Press
- Bledsoe, Caroline H , and Barney Cohen 1993 *Social dynamics of adolescent fertility in Sub-Saharan Africa, Population dynamics of Sub-Saharan Africa* Washington, D C National Academy Press.
- Boxill, Ian 1994 *The Gleaner*, April 12
- Boyne, Ian 2008 Dancehall's betrayal of reggae *The Gleaner*, February 24
- 2008 From Bob Marley to Mavado *The Gleaner*, February 17
- Bradley, Lloyd 1996 *Reggae on CD The essential guide* London Kyle Cathie Limited
- 2001 *This is Reggae Music The Story of Jamaica's music (Bass culture When reggae*

- was king*) New York Grove Press
- Brown, Karen McCarthy 2001 *Mama Lola A Vodou priestess in Brooklyn* Berkeley, Calif University of California Press
- Bruner, Edward M , and Paul Benson 1993 Introduction The ethnographic self and the personal self In *Anthropology and Literature*, edited by Paul J Benson Urbana University of Illinois Press
- Bullough, Vern L 1994 *Science in the bedroom A history of sex research* New York Basic Books
- Burke, Shirley M 1977 Interview with Cedric Brooks *Jamaica Journal* 11 (1-2) 14-17
- Burnett, Richard 2006 Rastaman Vibration *The Hour*, July 13
- Burrell, Philip "Fatis " 2009 Interview by author Kingston, February 23
- Burton, Richard D E 1997 *Afro-Creole Power, opposition, and play in the Caribbean* Ithaca, N Y Cornell University Press
- Campbell, Charles H E 2009 Dancehall has melody, Papa Eddie, October 26
- Carnegie, Charles V 1996 The Dundus and the Nation *Cultural Anthropology* 11 (4, Resisting Identities) 470-509
- Cashmore, Ernest 1983 *Rastaman The Rastafarian movement in England* London Unwin Paperbacks
- Cassidy, Frederic Gomes, and R B Le Page 2002 *Dictionary of Jamaican English* Barbados University of the West Indies Press
- CBC News online 2008 Jamaican gay activist seeks refugee status in Canada February 14, [accessed October 19 2010] Available from <http://www.cbc.ca/canada/toronto/story/2008/02/14/gareth-henry.html>
- Chamberlain, Josh 2009 Email correspondence June 16
- Chang, Kevin O'Brien, and Wayne Chen 1998 *Reggae routes The story of Jamaican music* Philadelphia Temple University Press
- Charles, Christopher A D 2003 Skin bleaching, self-hate, and black identity in Jamaica *Journal of Black Studies* 33 (6) 711-728
- Chevannes, Barry 1988 Race and culture in Jamaica *World Marxist Review* 31 138-144

- 1994 *Rastafari Roots and ideology* Syracuse, N Y Syracuse University Press
- 1999 *Between the Living and the Dead The Apotheosis of Rastafari Heroes In Religion, Diaspora, and Cultural Identity*, edited by J W Pulis New York Gordon and Breach Publishers
- 2001 *Learning to be a man Culture, socialization, and gender identity in five Caribbean communities* Barbados University of the West Indies Press
- 2006 *Betwixt and between Explorations in an African-Caribbean mindscape* Kingston, Jamaica, Miami Ian Randle Publishers
- Chude-Sokei, Louis 1994 Post-nationalist Geographies Rasta, Ragga, and Reinventing Africa *African arts* 27 (4) 80-84, 96
- Clifford, James, and George E Marcus 1986 *Writing culture The poetics and politics of ethnography* Berkeley University of California Press
- Collins, Patricia Hill 2004 *Black Sexual Politics African Americans, Gender, and the New Racism* New York, United States Routledge
- Coombs, Orde 1974 *Is Massa Day dead? Black moods in the Caribbean* Garden City, N Y Anchor Books
- Coomey, Chris 2006 Yellowman *Miami New Times*, February 23
- Cooper, Carolyn 1989 Slackness hiding from culture Erotic play in the dancehall *Jamaica Journal* 22 (4) 12-31
- 1990 Slackness hiding from culture Erotic play in the dancehall, part 2 *Jamaica Journal* 23 (1) 44-52
- 1994a "Lyrical gun" Metaphor and role play in Jamaican dancehall culture *Massachusetts review* 35 (3-4) 429-447
- 1994b Righteous reggae *Observer*, August 12-14
- 1995 *Noises in the blood Orality, gender, and the "vulgar" body of Jamaican popular culture* Durham, N C Duke University Press
- 2000 Lady Saw cuts loose Female fertility rituals in Jamaican dance hall culture *Dancing in the millennium* Proceedings of the Society of Dance History Scholars 23 79-83
- 2004 *Sound clash Jamaican dancehall culture at large* New York, N Y Palgrave Macmillan

- 2009 Buju versus Bob No contest *The Gleaner*, May 10
- Cummings, Ronald 2010 (Trans)Nationalisms, marronage, and queer Caribbean subjectivities *Transforming Anthropology* 18 (2) 169-180
- Davis, Angela Y 1998 *Blues legacies and black feminism Gertrude "Ma" Rainey, Bessie Smith, and Billie Holiday* New York Pantheon Books
- Davis, Garwin 2001 Homophobia remains high Gays remain in seclusion, health officials worry homophobia *Jamaica Gleaner*, July 26
- Davis, Stephen 1994 *Bob Marley Conquering lion of reggae* London Plexus
- Daw, DJ Jack 2008 My Yellowman Story [accessed December 3, 2008] Available from [www.charliegillett.com/phpBB2/viewtopic.php?p=45681&sid=d6eacc6df9c103a920de181a08138762](http://www.charliegillett.com/phpBB2/viewtopic.php?p=45681&sid=d6eacc6df9c103a920de181a08138762)
- Dawes, Kwame 2002 *Bob Marley Lyrical genius* London Sanctuary
- D'Costa, Jean 1994 Oral Literature, Formal Literature The Formation of Genre in Eighteenth-Century Jamaica *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 27 (4) 663-676
- Diawara, Manthia 1998 *In search of Africa* Cambridge, Mass Harvard University Press
- Douglas, Kelly Brown 1999 *Sexuality and the Black church A womanist perspective* Maryknoll, N Y Orbis Books
- Dunbar, Sly 2006 Interview by author (telephone), September 4
- 2009 Interview by author Kingston, One Pop Studio, February 23
- Duncan, Carol B 2008 *This spot of ground Spiritual Baptists in Toronto* Waterloo Wilfrid Laurier Press
- Dunkley, David E 2005 Eventide Jamaica National Heritage Trust [accessed September 20, 2010] Available from <http://www.jnht.com/disndat/eventide.php>
- Durkheim, Emile, Carol Cosman, and Mark Sydney Cladis 2001 *Elementary forms of religious life* Oxford, Toronto Oxford University Press
- Dyson, Michael Eric 2001 *Holler if you hear me Searching for Tupac Shakur* New York Basic Civitas Books
- Edmonds, Ennis Barrington 2003 *Rastafari From outcasts to culture bearers* Oxford, New York Oxford University Press

- Ehrenreich, Barbara 2007 *Dancing in the streets A history of collective joy* New York Metropolitan Books
- Eldridge, Michael S 2005 Bop Girl Goes Calypso Containing Race and Youth Culture in Cold War America *Anthurium A Caribbean Studies Journal* 3 (2) 35 paragraphs
- Eliade, Mircea 1959 *Sacred and the profane The nature of religion* San Diego. Harcourt Brace Jovanovich
- Erskine, Noel Leo 2005 *From Garvey to Marley Rastafari theology* Gainesville, FL University Press of Florida
- Eyre, Banning 2006 *Salif Keita* 2006 World Music Productions [accessed September 25, 2010] Available from [http //www afropop org/multi/interview/ID/93](http://www.afropop.org/multi/interview/ID/93)
- Farley, Margaret A 2008 *Just love A framework for Christian sexual ethics* New York Continuum
- Figueroa, Mark 1994 Garrison communities in Jamaica, 1962-1993 Their growth and impact on political culture *Democracy and Democratization in Jamaica Fifty Years of Adult Suffrage* (Conference presentation, December 6-7) Faculty of Social Sciences, University of West Indies, Kingston, Jamaica
- Figueroa, Mark and Amanda Sives 2003 Garrison Politics and Criminality in Jamaica Does the 1997 Election Represent a Turning Point? In *Understanding crime in Jamaica New challenges for public policy*, edited by A Harriott Kingston University of the West Indies Press
- Forgie, Andell 1993 *Soldering The Starlights featuring Stanley Beckford* (liner notes) Heartbeat Records
- Foster, Chuck 1999 *Roots, rock, reggae An oral history of reggae music from ska to dancehall* New York Billboard
- Foucault, Michel 1990 *History of sexuality* New York Vintage Books
- Foucault, Michel, and Paul Rabinow 1997 *Ethics Subjectivity and truth, The essential works of Foucault, 1954-1984* New York New Press
- Francis-Jackson, Chester 1995 *The official dancehall dictionary A guide to Jamaican dialect and dancehall slang* Kingston Kingston Publishers Ltd
- Garcia, Guy, and E Thigpen David 1993 Marley's Ghost *Time*, September 13
- Garnice, Michael 2007 Lord Lebby Mentomusic com, April 1, [accessed September 24, 2010] Available from [http //www mentomusic com/LordLebby htm](http://www.mentomusic.com/LordLebby.htm)

- Gayle, Barbara 2006 Gay rights activist's killer gets life *Jamaica Gleaner*, May 21
- Gaynor, Desmond 2008 Interview by author New York, August 12
- Gebrekidan, Fikru N 2001 *Bond without blood A study of Ethiopian-Caribbean ties, 1935--1991* Dissertation Abstracts International, vol 62-08A
- Ghoston, Stephanie, PBworks 2009 Yellowman PBworks, April 9, [accessed November 23, 2009] Available from [http //reggaelicious pbworks com/Yellowman?SearchFor=yellowman&sp=1](http://reggaelicious.pbworks.com/Yellowman?SearchFor=yellowman&sp=1)
- Gilroy, Paul 1982 Police and Thieves In *The Empire strikes back Race and racism in 70s Britan*, edited by C f C C Studies London Hutchinson in association with the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies, University of Birmingham
- 1987 *'There ain't no black in the Union Jack' The cultural politics of race and nation* Chicago ILL University of Chicago Press
- 1993 *The black Atlantic Modernity and double consciousness* Cambridge, Mass Harvard University Press
- Goulet, Jean-Guy 1998 *Ways of knowing Experience, knowledge, and power among the Dene Tha* Lincoln University of Nebraska Press
- Grass, Randall 2009 *Great spirits Portraits of life-changing world music artists* Jackson University Press of Mississippi
- Gray, Obika 2004 *Demeaned but empowered The social power of the urban poor in Jamaica* Kingston, Jamaica University of the West Indies Press
- Green, Joshua 1996 Not-so-mellow Yellowman *Denver Westword*, September 19
- Gutzmore, Cecil 2004 Casting the first stone! Policing of homo/sexuality in Jamaican popular culture *Interventions International Journal of Postcolonial Studies* 6 (1) 118-134
- Hagerman, Brent 2007a *Everywhere is War Peace and Violence in the Life and Work of Bob Marley* Paper presented at the Interdisciplinary Arts Conference, Wilfrid Laurier University, Waterloo, Ontario March 30
- 2007b Buju Banton The Music Hall, London ON July 6 *Exclaim! Magazine*, August
- 2011 Buried above the ground In search of a Rastafarian doctrine of death at the Bob Marley Mausoleum *Wadabagei A Journal of the Caribbean and its Diasporas*, forthcoming in April 2011
- Hansing, Katrin 2001 Rasta, race and revolution Transnational connections in socialist Cuba

*Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 27 (4) 733

- Harding, Rachel Elizabeth, R Marie Griffith, and Barbara Dianne Savage 2006 *É a senzala Slavery, women, and embodied knowledge in Afro-Brazilian Candomblé* In *African diaspora Knowledge, power and performance* edited by R M S Griffith and Barbara Dianne Baltimore, MD, US Johns Hopkins University Press
- Harriott, Anthony 2000 *Police and crime in Jamaica* Kingston University of West Indies Press
- Harris, Trevor 1987 Reports in Sports 'n' Arts *The Gleaner*
- Haskins, James 2002 *One love, one heart A history of reggae* New York Jump at the Sun
- Hebdige, Dick 1974 *Reggae, rastas & rudies Style and the subversion of form* Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies, University of Birmingham
- 1987 *Cut 'n' mix Culture, identity and Caribbean music* London Comedia
- Henry, Frances 1976 *Ethnicity in the Americas, World anthropology* The Hague Mouton
- Henry, Roland 2009 Dancehall music lacking, says Seaga *Jamaica Observer*, October 13
- Hilferty, Robert 2006 Albino Afropop star Salif Keita talks about Mali, magic, murder *Bloomberg News*, July 18, [accessed September 25, 2010] Available from <http://www.salifkeita.us/Press.php>
- Hill, Errol 1974 The Calypso In *Caribbean rhythms The emerging English literature of the West Indies*, edited by J T Livingston New York Washington Square Press
- Hodge, Merle 1974 The shadow of the whip A comment on male-female relationships in the Caribbean In *Is Massa Day dead? Black moods in the Caribbean*, edited by O Coombs Garden City, N Y Anchor Books
- Hope, Donna P 2006 *Inna di dancehall Popular culture and the politics of identity in Jamaica* Kingston University of the West Indies Press
- 2008a "Chi-ChiMan F1 Get Sladi" Exploring Homophobia as Alternative Discourses of Masculinity in Dancehall Culture In *LT1 Gender and Sexuality in Jamaica*, edited by S Morimoto Kagawa, Japan Mighty Mules Bookstore
- 2008b Gangsta Ras Jamaican Popular Culture and Rastafari in the 21st Century Paper presented at the Global Reggae Conference Kingston February 20
- Hopkin, John B 1978 Music in the Pentecostal Church *Jamaica Journal* 42 22-40
- Huey, Steve 2010 *Yellowman Biography* All Music Guide [accessed October 20, 2010]

- Available from [www.allmusic.com/cg/amg.dll?p=amg&sql=11kzfpqx95ld6e~T1](http://www.allmusic.com/cg/amg.dll?p=amg&sql=11kzfpqx95ld6e~T1)
- HumCity 2008 Yellowman HumCity, September 22, [accessed October 1, 2008] Available from <http://humcity.com/2008/09/yellowman/>
- Hurford, Ray 1982 *Small Axe* 13 (Summer)
- 2004 History of Version *The Small Axe People*, July, [accessed December 18, 2009] Available from [www.smallaxepeople.com/HistoryOfVersion.htm](http://www.smallaxepeople.com/HistoryOfVersion.htm)
- Hutton, Clinton 2007 Forging identity and community through aestheticism and entertainment The sound system and the rise of the DJ *Caribbean Quarterly* 53 (4) 16-31
- Hyatt, Cottrell 2006 *History of Alpha Boys School* Alpha Old Boys Association, [accessed November 25, 2009] Available from [www.alphaoldboysassociation.com/history.html](http://www.alphaoldboysassociation.com/history.html)
- Jamaica Labour Party 2009 Edward Seaga [accessed December 9 2009] Available from [www.jamaicalabourparty.com/base/content/edward-seaga?page=02](http://www.jamaicalabourparty.com/base/content/edward-seaga?page=02)
- Jefferson, Thomas 1801 *Notes on the State of Virginia* Newark Pennyington & Gould
- Jekyll, Walter 1967 *Jamaican song and story Annancy stories, digging sings, ring tunes, and dancing tunes* Nendeln Liechtenstein, Kraus
- Jlaw 2007 Dundus In [UrbanDictionary.com](http://UrbanDictionary.com) San Francisco Urban Dictionary LLC
- Johnson, Maurice “Jack Scorpio ” 2009 Interview by author Kingston, February 19
- Johnson-Hill, Jack A 1995 *I-sight The world of Rastafari an interpretive sociological account of Rastafarian ethics* Evanston, Ill , Metuchen, N J American Theological Library Association, Scarecrow Press
- Jones, Simon 1988 *Black culture, white youth The reggae tradition from JA to UK* Basingstoke Macmillan Education
- Jordan, Winthrop D 1977 *White over black American attitudes toward the negro, 1550-1812* New York Norton
- Katz, David 2007 Stanley Beckford Jamaican music pioneer who enjoyed a career revival in Europe *The Guardian*, April 17
- Kennedy, Randall 2002 *Nigger The strange career of a troublesome word* New York Pantheon Books
- Kenner, Rob 2000 Strong me strong *Spin* 16 (12) 150-156

- Kiernan, Pauline 2007 *Filthy Shakespeare Shakespeare's Most Outrageous Sexual Puns* London Gotham
- Kincaid, Jamaica 2000 *A small place* New York, NY Farrar, Straus and Giroux
- King, Stephen A , Barry T III Bays, and Renée Foster 2003 *Reggae, Rastafari, and the Rhetoric of Social Control* Jackson UP of Mississippi
- Kingston, David 2009 Email correspondence, January 22
- LaFont, Suzanne 2001 Very Straight Sex The Development of Sexual Morés in Jamaica *Journal of Colonialism and Colonial History* 2 (3)
- Lake, Obiagele 1998 *Rastafari women Subordination in the midst of liberation theology* Durham, N C Carolina Academic Press
- Leach, Edmund 1964 Anthropological aspects of language Animal categories and verbal abuse In *New directions in the study of language*, edited by E H Lenneberg Cambridge, MA MIT Press
- Lee, Hélène, Stephen Davis, and Lily Davis 2003 *The first Rasta Leonard Howell and the rise of Rastafarianism* IL, United States Lawrence Hill, 2003 Chicago
- Lesser, Beth 2008 *Dancehall The rise of Jamaican dancehall culture* London Soul Jazz Publishing
- 2009 Interview by author (telephone), January 21
- Lewis, Linden 2003 *Culture of gender and sexuality in the Caribbean* Gainesville, FL University Press of Florida
- Lewis, Zemroy "Zimma" 2008 Interview by author New York, August 12
- Little, Sister Bernadette 2009 Email correspondence June 26, June 28
- Long, Edward 1970 *The history of Jamaica, or, General survey of the ancient and modern state of that island with reflections on its situations, settlements, inhabitants, climate, products, commerce, laws, and government* London F Cass
- Lovelace, Earl 1978 The beat, sound and soul of calypso *People* (Trinidad), January 1978, 41-44
- Lovindeer, Lloyd, and Carolyn Allen 1990 Women in dancehall A response *Jamaica Journal* 23 (1) 51-52
- Lucey, Deanne 1983 *Yellowman Live at Reggae Sunsplash* (liner notes) Genes

- M, Papa 2008 (blog response to DJ Jack Daw), August 2, [accessed December 3 2008]  
Available from [www.charliegillett.com/phpBB2/viewtopic.php?p=45681&sid=d6eacc6df9c103a920de181a08138762](http://www.charliegillett.com/phpBB2/viewtopic.php?p=45681&sid=d6eacc6df9c103a920de181a08138762)
- MacGaffey, Wyatt 1968 Kongo and the King of the Americans *The Journal of Modern African Studies* 6 (2) 171-181
- Manley, Michael 1982 *Jamaica Struggle in the Periphery* London Third World Media
- Manuel, Peter Lamarche, Kenneth M Bilby, and Michael D Largey 1995 *Caribbean currents Caribbean music from rumba to reggae* Philadelphia Temple University Press
- Marshall, Wayne 2007 *Follow Me Now The Zigzagging Zunguzung Meme* [accessed September 9, 2010] Available from <http://wayneandwax.com/?p=137>
- Martin, Charles D 2002 *White African American body A cultural and literary exploration* New Brunswick, N J Rutgers University Press
- Mash10sounds 2007 Video of Yellowman concert performance at Ostroda Reggae Festival, Poland Available from <http://www.youtube.com/user/mash10sound>
- McCutcheon, Russell T 1997 *Manufacturing religion The discourse on sui generis religion and the politics of nostalgia* New York Oxford University Press
- McDaniel, Lorna, A Olsen Dale, and E Sheehy Daniel 1998 Trinidad and Tobago In *The Garland Encyclopedia of World Music, Volume 2 South America, Mexico, Central America, and the Caribbean* New York and London Garland
- McDannell, Colleen 1995 *Material Christianity Religion and popular culture in America* New Haven Yale University Press
- McGowan, Howard 1984 *The Gleaner*, September 1
- 1987 It won't last forever, says Dennis Brown *The Gleaner*, August 30
- Mellow 2008 Interview by author Kingston, February 16
- Milner, Greg 2003 Wyclef Jean My Life in Music *Spin*, December 2
- Mintz, Sidney Wilfred, and Richard Price 1992 *The birth of African-American culture An anthropological perspective* Boston Beacon Press
- Mintz, Sidney Wilfred, and Sally Price 1985 *Caribbean contours* Baltimore Johns Hopkins University Press
- Murrell, Nathaniel Samuel, William David Spencer, and Adrian Anthony McFarlane 1998

- Chanting down Babylon The Rastafari reader* Philadelphia Temple University Press
- Myrie, Iris 2003 Distasteful side of dancehall music *The Gleaner*, February 14
- Nadel, Ira Bruce 1984 *Biography Fiction, fact, and form* New York St Martin's Press
- 1996 *Various positions A life of Leonard Cohen* New York Pantheon Books
- Nelson, Charmaine A , and Camillie A Nelson 2004 *Racism, Eh? A Critical Inter-Disciplinary Anthology of Race and Racism in Canada* Concord Captus Press
- Nettleford, Rex 1974 Caribbean Perspectives the Creative Potential and the Quality of Life In *Caribbean Rhythms the emerging English literature of the West Indies*, edited by James T Livingston New York Washington Square Press
- 1994 Dance-hall, Part of the Jamaican Heritage? *The Gleaner*, July 22
- Nicholson, D V 2005 *History of Calypso From Benna 1834 to Calypso 1985* Museum of Antigua and Barbuda, 27 Oct, [accessed 2009] Available from [http //www antigua museums org/cultural htm#Calypso](http://www.antigua.museums.org/cultural.htm#Calypso)
- Nye, Stephen 2007 *Trojan Slack Reggae Box Set* (liner notes) Trojan Records
- O'Connor, Sinead 2005 Interview by author (telephone), September 14
- O'Gorman, Pamela 1988 Gleaner Top Ten *Jamaica Journal* 21 (4) 50-54
- Orsi, Robert A 2010 *The Madonna of 115th street Faith and community in Italian Harlem, 1880-1950* New Haven Yale University Press
- Ossie, Count 1972 Groundations Count Ossie and the MRR *Swing*, Sept/Oct 1972, 10-11
- Owens, Joseph 1982 *Dread The Rastafarians of Jamaica* London, Exter, N H Heinemann, Heinemann Educational Books
- Oxaal, Ivor 1968 *Black Intellectuals Come to Power* Cambridge, Mass Schenkman Publishing Company
- Parrinder, Geoffrey 1996 *Sexual morality in the world's religions* Oxford Oneworld
- Patrick, Peter 1995 Recent Jamaican Words in Sociolinguistic Context *American Speech A Quarterly of Linguistic Usage* 70 (3) 227-264
- Phillippo, James M 1970 (1843) *Jamaica Its past and present state* Westport, CT Negro University Press

- Pinn, Anthony 2009 Introduction The black labyrinth, aesthetics, and black religion In *Black religion and aesthetics Religious thought and life in Africa and the African diaspora*, edited by A Pinn New York Palgrave Macmillan
- Pilgrim, Papa 1993 Reggae Sunsplash 93 Report from Yard *The Beat* 12 (5) 49
- Plato, and R S Bluck 1955 *Phaedo* London Routledge & Paul
- Pollard, Velma 1994 *Dread talk The language of Rastafari* Kingston, Jamaica Canoe Press
- Prahlad, Sw Anand 2001 *Reggae wisdom Proverbs in Jamaican music* Jackson University Press of Mississippi
- Price, Charles Reavis A 2002 *No cross, no crown Identity formation, nigrescence, and social change among Jamaica's first- and second-generation Rastafarians* Dissertation/Thesis, ProQuest Information & Learning
- Price, Joyce Howard 2006 Singer raises awareness of Africa albinos *The Washington Times*, August 14
- Prothero, Stephen R 1996 *The white Buddhist The Asian odyssey of Henry Steel Olcott* Bloomington Indiana University Press
- Quevedo, Raymond 1983 *Atilla's kaiso A short history of Trinidad calypso* St Augustine University of the West Indies
- Reddock, Rhoda 2004 *Interrogating Caribbean masculinities Theoretical and empirical analyses* Kingston University of the West Indies Press
- Reel, Penny 1982 Yellow fever Yellowman, Edmonton Pickett's Lock
- Robinson, Owen "Willa " 2009 Interview by author Kingston, February 21
- Rohlehr, Gordon 1970 Sparrow and the Language of Calypso *Savacou A Journal of the Caribbean Artists Movement* 2 87-99
- 1990 *Calypso & society in pre-independence Trinidad* Port of Spain, Trinidad G Rohlehr
- Rowe, Maureen 1998 Gender and Family Relations in Rastafari A Personal Perspective In *Chanting Down Babylon The Rastafari Reader*, edited by N S Murrell, William D, McFarlane, Adrian A Philadelphia Temple University Press
- Ryman, Cheryl 1980 The Jamaica Heritage in Dance *Jamaica Journal* 44 50
- Salewicz, Chris 2004 The Chapel of Love Bob Marley's Last Resting Place In *Everything*

- Little Thing Gonna Be Alright The Bob Marley Reader*, edited by H Bordowitz  
Cambridge Da Capo
- Salewicz, Chris, and Adrian Boot 2001 *Reggae explosion The story of Jamaican music* New York Harry N Abrams
- Salih, Sara 2007 Our people know the difference, black is a race, jew is a religion, f\*g\*\*tism is a sin' *Wasafiri* 22 (1) 1-5
- Salwak, Dale 1996 *Literary biography Problems and solutions* Iowa City University of Iowa Press
- Saunders, Cyril 1983 Mellow Yellow *Black Echoes*, July 16, 15
- Saunders, Patricia J 2003 Is Not Everything Good to Eat, Good to Talk Sexual Economy and Dancehall Music in the Global Marketplace *Small Axe* 7 (1) 95-115
- Savishinsky, Neil J 1994 Rastafari in the Promised Land The Spread of a Jamaican Socioreligious Movement among the Youth of Africa *African Studies Review* 37 (3) 19
- Seaga, Edward 2008 The Age of Permissiveness *The Gleaner*, March 9
- Selecta *Jamaican Riddim Directory* Greenscreen Oldschool / Selecta [Available from [www.jamrid.com](http://www.jamrid.com)]
- Senior, Olive 2003 *Encyclopedia of Jamaican heritage* St Andrew, Jamaica Twin Guinep Publishers
- Sharpe, Jenny, and Samantha Pinto 2006 The sweetest taboo Studies of Caribbean sexualities, a review essay *Signs Journal of Woman in Culture and Society* 32 (1) 247-274
- Silvera, Makeda 1997 Man royals and sodomites Some thoughts on the invisibility of Afro-Caribbean lesbians In *Que(e)rying religion A critical anthology*, edited by G D a S E H Comstock New York Continuum
- Simpson, Hyacinth M 2004 'Voicing the Text' the Making of an Oral Poetics in Olive Senior's Short Fiction *Callaloo* 27 (3) 829-843
- Singer, Lesli 1984 Yellowman Takes Over *Cool Runnings*, 5,7
- Slone, Thomas H 2003 *Rasta is cuss* Oakland, Calif Masala Press
- Smith, Jonathan Z 1978 *Map is not territory Studies in the history of religions* Leiden Brill
- Smith, Wilfred Cantwell 1963 *The meaning and end of religion A new approach to the religious traditions of mankind* New York Macmillan

- Snowden, Don 1986 Overcomes affliction Yellowman rippin' 'n' rappin' again *Los Angeles Times*, October 15
- Sobo, Elisa Janine 1993 *One blood The Jamaican body* Albany State University of New York Press
- Stanley-Niaah, Sonjah 2005 'Dis Slackness Ting' A Dichotomizing Master Narrative in Jamaican Dancehall *Caribbean Quarterly* 51 (3) 55
- 2006 'Slackness Personified,' Historicized and Delegitimized *Small Axe A Caribbean Journal of Criticism* 21 174-185
- Steffens, Roger 2008 Reggae in North America In Global Reggae Conference University of West Indies, Kingston Jamaica
- Stelfox, Dave 2010 *The eMusic Dozen Greensleeves* emusic.com Inc [accessed October 20, 2010] Available from [www.emusic.com/lists/showlist.html?lid=20046565](http://www.emusic.com/lists/showlist.html?lid=20046565)
- Stephens, Michelle A 1998 Babylon's 'Natural Mystic' the North American Music Industry, the Legend of Bob Marley, and the Incorporation of Transnationalism *Cultural Studies* 12 (2) 139-167
- Stewart, Dianne M 2005 *Three eyes for the journey African dimensions of the Jamaican religious experience* Oxford, New York Oxford University Press
- Stoler, Ann Laura 2002 *Carnal knowledge and imperial power Race and the intimate in colonial rule* Berkeley University of California Press
- Stolzoff, Norman C 2000 *Wake the town and tell the people Dancehall culture in Jamaica* Durham, N C Duke University Press
- Tafari-Ama, Imani 2006 *Blood, bullets and bodies Sexual politics below Jamaica's poverty line* Multi Media Communications
- Tamburrino, Scott 2010 King Yellowman website TamboWeb Design Available from [www.kingyellowman.com](http://www.kingyellowman.com)
- The Gleaner* 1982 "Yellow Man" Steals Show August 7
- The Gleaner* 1999 High Price of Beauty July 18
- The Jamaica Observer* 2009 Bob Marley is not the greatest musician—Buju April 27
- Thomas, Deborah A 2004 *Modern blackness Nationalism, globalization, and the politics of culture in Jamaica* Durham, NC Duke University Press

- Thomas, Polly and Adam Vaitlingam 2007 *The Rough Guide to Jamaica* New York Rough Guides
- Tillich, Paul 1958 *Dynamics of faith* New York Harper & Row
- TSO Productions 2009 Community forum sparks lively debate (press release) Brooklyn TSO Productions
- Turner, Mary 1998 *Slaves and missionaries The disintegration of Jamaican slave society, 1787-1834* Kingston University of the West Indies Press
- Tweed, Thomas A 2002 Who is a Buddhist? Night-Stand Buddhists and Other Creatures In *Westward dharma Buddhism beyond Asia*, edited by C S B Prebish, Martin Berkeley University of California Press
- 2006 *Crossing and dwelling A theory of religion* Cambridge, Mass Harvard University Press
- Urban, Hugh B 2003 *Tantra Sex, secrecy, politics and power in the study of religion* Berkeley University of California Press
- Wales, Josey 2009 Interview by author Kingston, February 25
- Walker, Klive 2005 *Dubwise Reasoning from the reggae underground* Toronto Insomniac Press
- Warner, Keith Q 1997 (1985) *Kaiso! the Trinidad calypso A study of the calypso as oral literature* Washington, D C Three Continents Press
- Weber, Max 1958 *The Protestant ethic and the spirit of capitalism* New York Scribner
- Weeks, Jeffrey 1989 *Sex, politics, and society The regulation of sexuality since 1800* London, New York Longman
- 1995 *Invented moralities Sexual values in an age of uncertainty* New York Columbia University Press
- Wexler, Paul L 1994 Rastafarian spirit replacing violence in dancehall lyrics *Billboard* 106 (47) 1(2)-3
- 2001 Reggae anthology *Yellowman Look how me sexy* (liner notes) New York VP Records
- White, Gareth 1982 Voices Crying in the Wilderness In *Reggae International*, edited by Peter Davis New York Rogner & Bernhard

- Whylye, Marjorie 2000 *Mento The What and the How* Kingston Whylye Communications
- Williams, Joan 2008 *Original dancehall dictionary* Fifth edition ed Kingston Yard Publications
- Williams, Larson 2000 Homophobia and gay activism in Jamaica *Small Axe* 7 (March) 106-111
- Williams, Raymond 1985 *Keywords A Vocabulary of Culture and Society* New York Oxford
- Willis, Tom 1993 From Ragga to Riches *Sunday Times*, April 4
- Yawney, Carol D 1976 Remnants of All Nations Rastafarian Attitudes to Race and Nationality In *Ethnicity in the Americas*, edited by F Henry The Hague Mouton Publishers
- 1989 To grow a daughter Cultural liberation and the dynamics of oppression in Jamaica In *Feminism From pressure to politics*, edited by A Miles and G Finn New York, NY Black Rose Books
- 1994 Rasta Mek a Trod Symbolic Ambiguity in a Globalizing Religion In *Arise Ye Mighty People! Gender, Class, and Race in Popular Struggles*, edited by T E Turner Trenton Africa World Press
- Yellowman 2007 Interview by Josh Chamberlain Kingston, January 17
- York, Geoffrey 2010 Wounds of the flesh Albinos under attack Globe Video, *The Globe and Mail* April 26 Available from <http://www.theglobeandmail.com/video/tanzanias-albino-people/article1546795/?view=picks>

### Interview dates with Yellowman

My interviews with Yellowman were often formal and structured, but during the time I spent with him in Kingston and on tour, many of our “interviews” were informal conversations. These occurred on the dates below. In addition to the listed dates I telephoned Yellowman several times to fact check stories and follow up on previous interviews.

July 17, 2005 at the Montreal International Reggae Festival

October 2, 2007 at Peabody’s Concert Club in Cleveland

February 12-16, 2008, Kingston

August 6-17, 2008, on tour between Chicago, New York and Toronto

February 16-25, 2009, Kingston

February 14-19, 2010, Kingston