
Since their 1980s rise to dominance as a popular form of music and culture in Jamaica, dancehall music and culture remain critically under-researched and under-theorized in the academy, even while they continue to generate immense critical debate and social engagement in Jamaica and elsewhere. Carolyn Cooper’s early celebratory feminist study (2004) stands as an important point of academic inquiry into this flashy and hyper-popular cultural form that has moved beyond Jamaica’s borders through its diaspora, and into multiple transnational localities.

Stanley Niaah’s Dancehall builds on the foundation set by multiple scholars (including Carolyn Cooper, Norman Stolzoff, Donna Hope, and others) and presents an ambitious attempt to theorize a performance geography of black popular culture, by tracing linkages from the slave ships, through a four-century time period into the contemporary spaces of Jamaica’s popular dancehall music culture. She identifies the book as utilizing an ecological perspective “grounded in a cultural studies approach that holds trans/multidisciplinarity and inter/multitextuality as givens” (p. xvi) and argues that it “reclaims” three missing texts: space, event, and actors/acts that have been elided from earlier works on Jamaican dancehall.

As a study in performance geography and cultural studies, Dancehall provides readers with rich empirical data on the performance geography of Kingston’s dancehall, including a mapping of some popular street dances, highlighting many that exploded in Jamaica at the turn of the millennium and beyond (pp. 93-94). It also offers a chronology of many popular dance names/styles that have run the gamut of dancehall’s favorites during the period 1986-2009 (pp. 143-45). In addition, it identifies important actors in Jamaican dancehall, for example providing a useful biography of dancehall’s master dancer, the late Gerald “Bogle” Levy (pp. 124-29), and highlighting the contribution of popular female dancers and dancehall queens like Stacey.

The critical overview of inner city dynamics and urban poverty in Kingston in Chapter 2 establishes a valuable foundation for the location of identity debates in the class-ridden maze of life in Kingston’s ghettoes. Stanley Niaah’s treatment of these urban spaces is complemented by the argument that the ghetto experience in Kingston is further circumscribed by the
pervasive nature of violence, gang culture and “institutionalized warfare with the police” (p. 46). She argues that dancehall’s inclusive potential is harnessed to provide a sense of solidarity and community, even if only at the psychic level. Thus, the use of space operates not just as action, but also as “process, operating on several economic, psychic, religious/spiritual, political and sociological planes” (p. 50).

The book’s novel presentation of the performance geography of Kingston’s dancehall is, however, dogged by the overwhelming, and at times unsuccessful, effort to link the empirical work on Kingston’s dancehall with historical and theoretical postulations about pre- and post-emancipation slave culture and transnational links to Africa. For example in Chapter 2, the temporal bridge fabricated between Spandex’s “drug mule” activities and the sometimes fatal recourse of captured Africans on a slave ship (jumping) lacks analytical depth and clear connectivity, while in Chapter 3, the attempt to link what is identified as the “peripatetic” nature of dance events to nomadism in pre-emancipation slave culture falls short.

Stanley Niaah articulates her theoretical debt to Paul Gilroy’s *The Black Atlantic* early (p. 17) and throughout the text, with her focus on the motifs of the slave ship, the plantation, and music as a counter-cultural force in its connection to Afro-diasporic culture. However, the theoretical and analytical strains in her book that resonate with Murray Forman’s 2004 work on space, place, and their articulations with race as a powered construct in American rap and hip hop receive no explicit acknowledgment. Forman’s book examines rap music, along with ancillary hip hop media including radio, music videos, rap press and the cinematic “hood” genre, and analyzes hip hop culture’s varying articulations of the terms “ghetto,” “inner-city,” and the “hood,” tracing an urban and cultural performance geography of how these spaces, both real and imaginary, are used to define individual and collective identity in the “hip hop nation.”

Stanley Niaah’s book makes critical theoretical inroads that provide a key signifier on the road map of dancehall’s transnational performance geography, and suggests genealogical commonalities between dancehall and related forms such as South African Kwaito and Latin American Reggaeton. Yet, the analytical and descriptive overview of these music cultures is presented in condensed format in the final chapter, with limited discussion of their signifiers, forms, and formats and the musical, social, or cultural relationships with Jamaica and dancehall music culture. An extensive