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Histories of Corporeal Meaning-Making in Kingston's Dancehall

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Sonjah Stanley Niaah, *Dancehall: From Slave Ship to Ghetto*. (Ottawa: University of Ottawa Press, 2010), 238 pp.

In *Dancehall: From Slaveship to Ghetto*, Sonjah Stanley Niaah takes up the task of documenting dancehall as a part of Jamaica's popular performance culture. After initial chapters that review existing scholarship on dancehall and introduce her cultural studies theoretical framework, Stanley Niaah takes an ethnographic approach to describing the often-ephemeral spaces in which dancehall events take place, the practices that define those spaces, and the individuals whose choreographic talent has shaped the dancehall scene. These three middle chapters are primarily focused on dancehall events in the Kingston Metropolitan Area (KMA), generally ranging between the 1980s-2000s but reaching back to the 1960s for comparison as well. As Stanley Niaah establishes in the wide-ranging literature review, the majority of dancehall scholarship by scholars such as Norman Stolzoff, Carolyn Cooper, and Garth White has focused on musical production. In these three chapters of *Dancehall*, she broadens that scholarship to include the analysis of how dancehall practitioners carve out and create the spaces for dancehall, as well as how the development of the dancehall music industry relies on the embodied practices that emerge in the dancehall space. Moving beyond KMA towards the end of the book, the last two chapters track dancehall as a global phenomenon, first through worldwide tours by dancehall musicians and finally in terms of its influence on other contemporary musical forms such as reggaetón, which emerges primarily from Central America and the Hispanophone Caribbean, and kwaito in South Africa. As a result, the meticulously detailed research that Stanley Niaah presents in *Dancehall* provides us with an invaluable resource for thinking about dancehall events expansively, from a single event and all the corporeal, spatial, and aural elements that constitute it, to dancehall's global circulation.

The driving question of Stanley Niaah's text is how, "out of such marginal spaces as the ghetto, performance cultures are consistently emerging, challenging the very contexts that militate against their emergence" (34). She connects the context of KMA to the global south by

defining its marginal spaces as constituted by bonds of solidarity formed through common class interests. Drawing on Ulf Hannerz's and Edwin Houghton's research on ghettos, Stanley Niaah places the performance practices of dancehall, kwaito, and reggaetón into conversation as three forms that became popular in response to the economic effects of a global imposition of neoliberalist policies (179-80). Following Houghton, she argues that through music participants in dancehall engage in a transnational dialogue that acknowledges similarities between global economic contexts. Stanley Niaah's methodology of performance analysis leads her to concentrate on the dynamics of creation and suppression as they emerge in KMA's dancehall production. Simultaneously, however, the framework of dancehall's resonance with performance practices emerging in communities far beyond Kingston reminds us of this project's broad implications.

The methodology that shapes this study, which Stanley Niaah terms "performance geography," allows her readers to accompany her to different dancehall events throughout the book, primarily through her ethnographic performance analyses. In thinking deeply about dancehall with the methodology of "performance geography," she uses the first term, performance, to broaden her analysis from music to include dance, self-adornment, the specificities of place and timing, as well as the recording and dissemination of dancehall events. As Stanley Niaah defines performance geography, more than what is staged, "I want to take account of the physical, mental, emotional and spiritual acts in the process of enacting one's being, in such historical and political experiential contexts as the Black Atlantic, between violation, ruptured roots and self-(re)construction" (32). Stanley Niaah's attention to specificities of particular locations, and the meaning that the people who inhabit in these locations invest in them over time, elicits the ways in which the performance events allow its participants to construct their identities from within it.

In the chapter entitled "Performing Geography in Kingston's Dancehall Spaces," Stanley Niaah uses her description of the "California California" event that took place at Rainbow Lawn on August 9, 2003, as an example of how a dancehall event typically unfolds throughout the night (60-62). Marking time hour by hour, she identifies the nuanced cues that indicate to participants how to use the space appropriately at any given moment. In another chapter, "Ritual Space, Celebratory Space," Stanley Niaah further develops the presentation of the "norms and codes of dancehall space" (60) that she began in the previous chapter. In this second close

description, she turns to Passa Passa, the Wednesday late night dancehall block party in the streets of the Tivoli Gardens neighborhood in Kingston. Continuing with the structure of marking the event's development hour by hour, here, she deepens the analysis by describing how the many individuals who use the space differently throughout the event each contribute to it. In chapter 5, "Geographies of Embodiment—Dance, Status, Style," rather than analyze a particular evening, Stanley Niaah chronicles the emergence of dance moves and analyzes in detail the kinesthetic meaning and choreography of some of the dance moves that have shown staying power and become part of a dance vocabulary beyond dancehall. With each of these examples, Stanley Niaah demonstrates how attentiveness to the use of space, the sense of time as it is experienced in dancehall, and the contributions of its participants, expand our definitions of dancehall.

Beyond the ethnographic close descriptions of dancehall events, Stanley Niaah's perceptive attention to the distribution of space and how people use the street, bars, and actual dance halls invites the reader into the Kingston Metropolitan Area: specific street and club names and descriptions of how social spaces are connected to one another grounds Stanley Niaah's work on how various dancehall venues function as spaces for identity construction (see in particular chapters "Introducing Performance Geography" and "Performing Geography in Kingston's Dancehall Spaces"). For as her analysis reminds us, the critical treatment of dancehall often focuses on the musical form, to the neglect of other aspects of this sociocultural phenomenon.

The political context of *Dancehall* is contemporary Jamaica, in which dancehall occupies a contradictory role: dancehall music is a ubiquitous and centrally important part of Jamaican culture, yet dancehall events take place in marginal spaces and under the restrictive control of the state. In the face of this precarious context, Stanley Niaah argues, it is the "power of the ritual, the sustenance it affords, its democratic regimes, its tangible structure of norms and codes, alongside a highly developed sense of meaning and identity tied to location among its key participants" (94-95) that allows dancehall to flourish. In bringing the spiritual, ritual aspects of dancehall events to the forefront, the study relies on ethnographic work to indicate the events' structures, and on the links between dancehall and the earlier African diasporic practices from which dancehall is derived. The historical example to which Stanley Niaah returns throughout *Dancehall* is limbo: building on Wilson Harris's articulation of limbo's development as a

kinesthetic response to the unimaginably tight spaces of the ship hulls, Stanley Niaah draws comparisons to the cramped quarters of Kingston's socio-economically vulnerable neighborhoods. She likewise traces the capacity to "appropriat[e] planned space for unplanned uses" (83) from limbo, through early to mid-nineteenth century booth dances, to dancehall. In addition to the movement vocabularies she details meticulously in "Geographies of Embodiment—Dance, Status, Style," what Stanley Niaah stresses throughout *Dancehall* is the continuous exercise of creation from within the margins. "Marginalization implies that little or no life can exist in these spaces, only scarcity, idleness, worthlessness, all of which have long been attributed to marginalized peoples. The recoding of mainstream perception of the margin, in deploying its potential to create and communicate a sense of identity, is indicative of power" (18). By consistently defying the idea that the spaces to which dancehall practitioners are relegated should be characterized solely by what they lack, Stanley Niaah argues that dancehall draws on a historical legacy of triumphant survival facilitated through the rituals of performance.

What permeates *Dancehall* is Stanley Niaah's passionate, reasoned defense of dancehall in the face of widespread popular assumptions about the destructive impact that dancehall has on Jamaican society and that, in contrast to reggae, dancehall celebrates misogyny, homophobia, and a culture of violent "bad-men." In response, Stanley Niaah highlights the ways in which women practitioners of dancehall make use of this space in order to challenge corporeal and sexual norms that exist both within dancehall and more broadly socially. With regard to homophobia, however, Stanley Niaah briefly notes that the continued popularity of all-male dance crews belies the heterosexism of many DJs and selectors and that, although the discourse surrounding dancehall is unequivocally homophobic, dancehall remains a space in which musicians, such as Elephant Man (141), and practitioners can experiment with queer gender performance. Stanley Niaah pushes back most forcefully against the negative characterizations of dancehall by disputing the claim that dancehall provides a site for the expression and propagation of violence in Jamaican society. She does not apologize for dancehall but rather, outright rejects this common portrayal of dancehall and argues that dancehall is a site of community celebration that decelerates violence, asserting that:

what is clear is that dancehall's contribution to social cohesion is widely underestimated, especially by those who charge dancehall with playing a role in what they perceive as

social decay [...] the very spaces created for the consumption and production of cultural forms, and for access to pleasure, constitute sites of financial and political opportunity for that practice and its creators. While many exist just above or just below the poverty line, and are left to self-destruct in the quagmire of barely habitable conditions within Kingston's ghettos, they mock that context by surviving beyond its limitations. (132)

Stanley Niaah's respect for the dancehall practitioners who survive despite their abandonment and criminalization by the state is palpable throughout *Dancehall*. For as she states at the outset of the book, "every created thing wants to know its beauty," and in *Dancehall*, Stanley Niaah not only documents and analyzes the lesser-studied aspects of dancehall, she does so while sharing an admiration for the beauty of dancehall with her readers.