

ARTICLE

## "Balls at Kingston to the 'Brown Girls,'"<sup>1</sup>: A Palimpsest for Bleached-Brown Skins in Jamaican Dancehall

D. A-R. Forbes-Erickson

Bowling Green State University, Ohio, US

forbes.erickson.1@gmail.com

The spectacle of brown skin in Jamaica emerged in the late eighteenth century to the early nineteenth century with the "balls at Kingston to the 'Brown Girls'" (Lewis 382), referred to as the "Brown Girls Balls." "Brown Girls" referred to mulatto women or *mulatress*, infantilized as "girls," who were off-springs of Europeans and enslaved Africans. Brown women were considered the "fair sex" by Eurocentric standards, known for their beauty and elegance, and sponsored by the British Royal Navy ranks of Admiral of the Red and Admiral of the Blue. By the early nineteenth century, the Brown Girls Balls started going out into the streets in processions in "sets" of skin color by the gradation or shade of skin, costumed in matching dresses and parasols as they danced and sang through the streets. Later, the Set Girls parades joined annual John Canoe masquerades, celebrated from Christmas to the New Year. A contemporary brown skin spectacle reemerged in dancehall in the 1990s with a bleached-brown appearance with skin bleaching creams, critiquing colorism. I see masquerades like the Brown Girls Balls and derivative masquerades as palimpsests for skin bleaching to play "brown" in dancehall today. I argue that references to brown skin spectacles in the late eighteenth century "balls at Kingston to the 'Brown Girls'" and derivative masquerades are palimpsests for the bleached-brown skins in contemporary dancehall that still haunts the society's consciousness about its past, and recontextualizes the seeming paradox of bleached-brown skin masquerade in dancehall to denounce racism and colorism.

**Keywords:** Brown Girls Balls; Set Girls; John Canoe; Dancehall; Masquerade; Brown Skin; late 17th century to early 21st century

*"I have women come up to me to tell me, I am where I am because I'm Brown – and I am where I'm at because I'm from uptown – I am where I'm at because of this and I am where I'm at because of that."* Carlene Smith. Personal Interview. 2011.

*... many years ago, an admiral of the red was superseded on the Jamaica station by an admiral of the blue; and both of them gave balls at Kingston to the "Brown Girls:" for the fair sex elsewhere are called the "Brown Girls" in Jamaica. In consequence of these balls all Kingston was divided into parties: from thence the division spread into other districts; and ever since, the whole island, at Christmas, is separated into rival factions of the Blues and the Reds, who contend for setting forth their processions with the greatest taste and magnificence.*

Mathew G. Lewis. "Journal of a West India Proprietor." *The Quarterly Review*, vol. L, John Murray, Ablemarle Street, 1834, p. 382.

<sup>1</sup> This title is from references to balls for Brown women in Jamaica from the late eighteenth century to the early nineteenth century (Lewis 382; Sherlock 48; Hill 239).



**Figure 1:** Carlene "The Dancehall Queen" at Reggae Sunsplash, 1994 from: Abel, Lee. [www.leeabelphotography.com/jamaica](http://www.leeabelphotography.com/jamaica).

*'Cause, I was told I would reach further  
 If the color of my skin was lighter  
 And I was made to feel inferior.  
 Cah society seh brown girls prettier  
 (Because society says brown girls are prettier)  
 Mi love di way mi look  
 (I love the way that I look)  
 Mi love mi pretty black skin  
 (I love my pretty black skin)  
 Respect due to mi strong melanin  
 (Respect is due to my strong melanin)  
 Proud of mi color, love di skin that I'm in  
 (Proud of my color, love the skin that I'm in)  
 Bun racism, demolish colorism  
 (Burn [denounce] racism, demolish colorism)*  
 Spice. "Black Hypocrisy." *Captured Mixtape*, lines 3–11, Scorn Dem Productions, 2018, parenthetical comments mine.

Over the past decades, debates have raged on about the efficacy of skin bleaching among enthusiasts in Jamaican dancehall, a musical genre, culture, and lifestyle that emerged from reggae music in the late 1970s. Jamaican dancehall involves its own brands of fashion, theatre, and film, produced by and for Black working-class people in Kingston, Jamaica (Niaah, *Dancehall* 132). Efficacy of skin bleaching is about the forthright

ability, determination, and the work that it takes to produce changes in skin color at will, and by any means necessary. In this case, dark-skinned Black participants in dancehall have attempted and succeeded in "lightening" or "whitening" dark skin to produce a bleached-brown appearance by applying chemical agents, peels, creams, and potions to the skin over weeks and months and even using heavy whitening makeup (Tucker 2013). As such, skin bleaching in dancehall is considered an accomplishment by its adherents; pleasurable fun and playfulness is inferred by dressing up with a bleached-brown appearance. Skin bleaching in dancehall is about pretending to be, and playing as, "brown" with blonde wigs, straight, long, or sometimes curly hair extensions of various colors (pink, red, green, purple, and more), leotards or bikini-type outfits, tights, and boots completing the dancehall "look." This look is generated by Black working-class people to see and be seen in the most spectacular and fantastical dancehall event showing the most various shades of bleached-brown skin possible.

Indubitably, the bleached-brown skin in dancehall seems to have reemerged from earlier historical masquerades with the spectacle of brown skin in the "balls at Kingston to the *'Brown Girls'*,"<sup>2</sup> noted here as the "Brown Girls Balls" from the late eighteenth century to the early nineteenth century at the height of the British plantocracy and the enslavement of Africans in the British colony of Jamaica.<sup>3</sup> "Brown girls," referred to as mulatto women or *mulatress*, infantilized as "girls," were the off-springs of Europeans and enslaved Africans during slavery. Eurocentric and colonial beauty standards considered Brown women to be the "fair sex" and "beautiful" with their light-skinned complexions (Cassidy and Le Page 72). The main attraction at the Brown Girls Balls, sponsored by the British Royal Navy ranks of "Admiral of the Red" and "Admiral of the Blue," represented as red and blue "Brown Girls" in corresponding balls, were, of course, were Brown women (Lewis 382; Sherlock 48; Hill 239). The Brown Girls balls were elegant soirées where Brown women were dressed in the latest fashions. And then, the most curious thing happened—all of Kingston vied for the Brown women in the Admiral of the Red Ball and Admiral of the Blue Ball. Soon, the event became a competitive spectacle with developing factions of support for the most beautiful Brown Girls in each ball (Sherlock 48).

By the early nineteenth century, the Brown Girls Balls started going out into the streets for the wider public to parade in "sets" of skin colors by the shades of brown skin as Red Set Girls and Blue Set Girls, under the patronage of white plantation mistresses and the British colony as a whole (Hill 239). Well known for their beauty, stateliness, and light-skin complexions, Set Girls were dressed in fanciful matching frocks with frills, off-the-shoulder puffed sleeves, laced petticoats, gold or beaded jewelry of earrings, necklaces, bracelets, large plumed hats, and color-coordinated parasols, no doubt to protect their fair brown skins in the hot sun. As the Set Girls danced, pranced, and sang in parades, visitors like Scottish writer Michael Scott were gobsmacked at the sight of their skin color gradations (Hill 239; Scott 214–215), as I am sure, he had never seen such a spectacle of glistening brown complexions on parade. Other Set Girls with special colors, included yellow set and green set, joined the Set Girls parades; but the most famous Set Girls of all were the Red Set Girls and Blue Set Girls from the original late eighteenth century Brown Girls Balls. Then in the early nineteenth century, the Set Girls parades joined the annual John Canoe masquerades, celebrated from Christmas to the New Year during the plantation era (Sherlock 48).

Historical references to Set Girls and John Canoe songs, dances, and the display of skin complexions revealed the politics of skin color sometime around the Emancipation of slavery in 1838 to 1841 when Black and Brown people disrupted the boundaries of British-sponsored skin color spectacles with disorder, satires, chaos, and eroticism with lewd songs, and dances such as *winin'*<sup>4</sup> and pretend sexual intercourse. This disruption to the once ordered skin color spectacles led to the British authorities banning John Canoe

<sup>2</sup> See Lewis 382, Sherlock 48, and Hill 239.

<sup>3</sup> Jamaica was a Spanish colony from 1494–1655. The Spanish enslaved the Indigenous Taino people and Africans, who were forcibly brought to Jamaica. When British troops led by General Robert Venables battled and won Jamaica from Spain for the British Empire, becoming an English colony in 1655, and continued in the trans-Atlantic slave trade that forced Africans into slavery on the island and across other British colonies in the Caribbean until the Emancipation of slavery in 1834 to 1838. Throughout the colonial years, Jamaica became a British colony in 1707, and then a Crown colony in 1866 until Independence from Britain in 1962. (See Green 1987 and Brathwaite 1971 on Jamaica's colonial history).

<sup>4</sup> The expression "to wine" or "*winin'*," comes from the circular movement of "winding of the hips in a circle," (Martin 294; Ryman 110–111; Niaah, *Dancehall* 135), probably observed by British travelers with "to wind the hips" or "winding up the hips." An eighteenth century British writer who observed the Set Girls' dexterity at *winin'* remarked, "I sometimes imagined they were on springs or hinges from the hips downward; whoever is most active and expert at wriggling, is reputed the best dancer" (Cooper 157). *Winin'* is African-derived "dancing emphasizing fluid pelvis rotations, either alone or in full physical contact front or back with another person" (Martin 294). The dance can be traced to several African dances (Martin 294). Peter Manuel argues that the African-derived *winin'* is "autosexual" and "asexual" in Trinidad carnival because he observes that dance partners are not necessarily lovers (27). Manuel notes that dance partners often *wine* from person to person, or from group to group, in fetes and masquerades (Manuel 27).

altogether in 1841 citing John Canoe masquerades as "disgusting orgies of African barbarism" (Wilmot 65). It was clear that Black and Brown people in John Canoe were disrupting the British-sponsored masquerades in what seemed to have been some kind of racial grotesquery on a grand scale that valued light skins over dark skins in the society, further emblazoned in public displays.

With this in mind, I see earlier historical Jamaican masquerades as palimpsests for skin bleaching in dancehall today. A palimpsest is an old parchment, document, or tablet that has been scratched off and reused for new writing. In the process of scraping, the original writing can still show through under the new writing, and this is an analogy for how Jamaican dancehall is the "new writing" atop of older historical masquerades. Just like a palimpsest that has been scraped off to be reused, bleached-brown skin in dancehall is a contemporary skin masquerade with layers of historical skin color masquerades that emerged from colonial domination and coerced skin displays that valued brown skin. I argue that references to brown skin in the late eighteenth century "balls at Kingston to the *'Brown Girls'*," and its derivative skin color masquerades are palimpsests for the bleached-brown skins in contemporary dancehall that still haunts the society's consciousness about its past, and recontextualizes the seeming paradox of bleached-brown skin masquerade in dancehall to denounce racism and colorism.<sup>5</sup> Historical spectacles of skin color masquerades have left an indelible mark on the consciousness surrounding Black skin that dancehall people have reacted to with cynicism about brown skin, to the point of playing brown with a bleached-brown skin appearance. Dancehall people have reacted with bleached-brown skins, out of spite for Jamaica's past skin color spectacles that are now caught up with present realities about colorism.

First, I will summarize the main issue of skin bleaching in dancehall as an act of denouncing racism and colorism with references to Spice's 2018 song, "Black Hypocrisy." Then I will provide a critical framework for skin color as performance, including the codification of skin color, race, gender and desirability in colonial constructions, beginning with the influence of Queen Elizabeth I's skin whitening makeup and the *Limpieza de Sangre* ("purity of blood") edicts of 1596 and 1601 that she instituted to expel Black people from Britain. The Queen's use of a whitening makeup was curious because it influenced British fashion that included this skin whitening makeup among British colonials and enslaved Africans on Jamaican sugar plantations later in the seventeenth century (Charles 375). Next, I will analyze surveys of Jamaican masquerades featuring skin color as spectacle from pre- and post-Emancipation such as the Brown Girls Balls, Set Girls Parades, John Canoe, Bruckins, and Queen Party to the emergence of dancehall in the 1970s with a plethora of Kings and Queens of Dancehall, known for their dance skills (Ryman 114–115; Niaah 138). Then, I will recontextualize the palimpsests of earlier historical masquerades that prominently featured brown skin as spectacle, with the contemporary bleached-brown skins in dancehall atop the layers of historical masquerades. Finally, I conclude with how the bleached-brown appearance, through skin bleaching, in dancehall is yet another skin color masquerade, but one that further serves to critique the age-old colorism and racism, refashioned in contemporary Jamaican life.

### Introduction: Bleached-Brown Skin Masquerade as Palimpsest

In the epigraph on Spice's 2018 dancehall hit "Black Hypocrisy," Spice criticizes Jamaican society for chastising Black people for skin bleaching when, as she claims, Jamaican society has historically valued "Brown girls" ("Black Hypocrisy" 2018). Grace Latoya Hamilton, known professionally as Spice and "Queen of Dancehall," is a Jamaican dancehall singer and deejay whose illustrious career started in 2000 with a break-out performance at popular dancehall festival, *Sting*. Since then, Spice has had chart-topping success and worldwide acclaim in reggae and dancehall as the "Queen of Dancehall" (Monger 2021). Currently, Spice is a cast member in VH1's reality television show, "Love & Hip-Hop: Atlanta" in the United States, which garnered her a larger international fan base. Spice's 2018 album, *Captured Mixtape*, topped the Billboard Reggae Albums and Reggae iTunes charts in the USA and UK. Her song, "Black Hypocrisy" from the *Captured Mixtape* album is directed at middle-class Jamaican society who privileges "Brown girls" over dark-skinned Black people. Spice ends the chorus with a strong denouncement of colorism and racism in Jamaica with "*Burn racism, demolish colorism* (Burn racism, demolish colorism)" (Spice 2018). She critiques Jamaican society for its hypocrisy in their attacks on dark-skinned Black people for becoming bleached-brown in dancehall. If anything, it is the system of racism and colorism that has done irreparable damage to the epidermis of Black skin, rather than the chemical potions applied to Black skin for a bleached-brown appearance in dancehall. This is a cynical, yet paradoxical masquerade against colorism.

<sup>5</sup> Racism is the belief in a hierarchy of "races" where white Europeans are superior to non-white people, and follows through in institutions and systems, supported by laws and cultural practices that deem the hierarchy to be true, leading to disastrous consequences for non-white groups.

However, many critics contend that Black people who lighten their Black skin are pathetic. After all, many believe that Black people who use skin bleaching creams to become "brown" are self-afflicted, suffering from "internalized racism," or worse, are "traitors of the race" (Charles 375; Brown-Glaude 34). Others have suggested a mental illness like body dysmorphic disorder (BDD) as the culprit.<sup>6</sup> Medical doctors have even warned against skin bleaching concoctions because of the alarming rate of skin cancers in Jamaica alone (Hope 715). Yet, the practice of skin bleaching continues all the more. Indeed, I agree with many of these scholarly and public health studies on skin bleaching, especially the risk of serious health consequences.

At the same time, skin bleaching in dancehall to attain a bleached-brown skin appearance is a nuanced and complex commentary when viewed through the lens of historical masquerades. The bleached-brown appearance is an over-the-top cynical response to racism and colorism in Jamaican society as a whole. White people are set at the top of the racial hierarchy with uncertain privileges whether wealthy or poor; and non-white and Black peoples are positioned at the bottom of the racial hierarchy with limited access and generational poverty. In addition, colorism or color-casting is the privileging of light-skinned Blacks or other groups over dark-skinned Blacks.<sup>7</sup> Color-casting, sometimes called "shadism," derives from eighteenth century slave plantations throughout the Americas, and considers the "shades" or gradations of skin complexions among Black people (hooks 127; Brathwaite 167; Blay 37). Historically, I would argue that Black skin has been more at risk from racist oppression than the skin bleaching creams reputed to damage the epidermis of Black skin. In other words, I would chastise racism and colorism, instead of the Black people who have always been oppressed, and have always used their bodies and skins in a cynical way, in this case, to play "brown" in dancehall as an act against colorism.

Shadism replaces earlier demeaning categories used during the slavery and plantation eras, including mulatto/mulatress (a person of Black and white ancestries), quadroon (a person who was one-quarter Black and three-quarters white), sambo (mulatto and negro), octoroon or mustiphini (a person who was one-eighth Black and seven-eighths white) and others (Brathwaite 167–168; hooks 127–128). Kamau Brathwaite shows some of the categories by measure of African and European backgrounds on Jamaican sugar plantations in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries:

Sambo: child of mulatto and negro

Mulatto: child of white man and negress

Quadroon: child of mulatto woman and white man

Mustee: child of quadroon [or pure Amerindian] by white man

Mustiphini: child of quadroon and white man. (Brathwaite 167)

Given the history of slavery in Jamaica, any critique of Black people's choices on their bodies and skins, runs the risk of revictimizing them for making, what I believe, is a cynical protest about racism and colorism. I say this because there is something about dressing up in dancehall that should never be overlooked. Dressing up in a full costume with wigs, extensions and bleached-brown skin, is part of dancehall's appeal and signals a deliberate act.

Skin bleaching is not only found in Jamaica, but in other Black communities around the world as a global phenomenon among African Americans in the United States, Africans on the continent of Africa, and even among Asian groups in Asia (Charles 2011; Lindsey 2011; Charuvastra 2016). Yaba Amgborale Blay attributes skin bleaching to what she calls a "global white supremacy," defined as "a historically based, institutionally perpetuated system of exploitation and oppression of continents, nations, and peoples classified as 'non-white' by continents, nations, and peoples who, by virtue of their white (light) skin pigmentation and/or ancestral origin from Europe, classify themselves as 'White'" (6). Global white supremacy privileges white over non-white populations. That global white supremacy is the reason for some Black and Asian people around the world to lighten their skin with bleaching creams is far too general a reason in every location, although I do agree that white supremacy is at the heart of any skin bleaching practice.

In the case of Jamaican dancehall, I see a clear distinction between the skin bleaching in dancehall and global skin bleaching among Black, Asian and other non-white groups of people. In Jamaica, skin bleaching is integral to dancehall as a masquerade and display. Masquerade is defined as a costumed procession or masked ball, or a disguise as a character. Efrat Tseëlon distinguishes between shared attributes in mask

<sup>6</sup> BDD is characterized by an excessive concern over one or more perceived defects about one's appearance, for example, in bodies, faces, noses, lips, eyes, hair textures, or skin complexions as flaws to be fixed or covered up (Greenberg 2021).

<sup>7</sup> Yaba Amgborale Blay defines colorism as "a system of hierarchical perceptions of value and discriminatory treatment based upon skin tone" (37). She notes that it was Alice Walker who first used the term "colorism" in her essay, "If the Present Looks Like the Past, What Does the Future Look Like?" in *In Search of our Mothers' Gardens*, 1983, p. 37.

and masquerade that I find useful in explaining the phenomenon of skin color masquerades. Tseëlon argues that masquerade is "a statement about the wearer. It is pleasurable, excessive, and sometime subversive. The mask is partial covering; disguise is full covering; masquerade is deliberate covering. The mask hints; disguise erases from view; masquerade overstates. The mask is an accessory; disguise is a portrait; masquerade is caricature" (2). Of these, I deploy masquerade because it "overstates" and "caricatures" brown skin by achieving the most bleached-brown skin that one can attain in dancehall to illustrate the complexities of brown skin in Jamaica. Suzan Kaiser argues that the deliberate covering in "masquerade challenges the hegemonic containment of others and unpicks the concept of authentic identity by suggesting the possibility of becoming, rather than merely delineating, the other" (xv). "Becoming" brown in masquerades always crosses impenetrable boundaries, including skin color line codification, gender, and race. Similarly, Terry Castle states that "like the world of satire, the masquerade projected an anti-nature, a world upside-down, an intoxicating reversal of ordinary sexual, social, metaphysical hierarchies" (6). A bleached-brown skin in dancehall is the very antithesis of a natural brown skin at birth. A bleached-brown skin masquerade is "anti-nature" that troubles the unchanging boundaries of skin color, colorism, and racism in Jamaican society.

From the early 1990s, skin bleaching became associated with dancehall when popular exhibitionist, Carlene Smith, emerged as a self-proclaimed "Dancehall Queen" (see **Figure 1**). Smith, whose father is white German and mother is Black Jamaican, is known as a "browning" or "Brown Girl," a contemporary reference to the historical mulatto woman or Brown woman in Jamaica.<sup>8</sup> The fact that the words "Brown Girl" and "browning" are still in contemporary use, says something about how dancehall is layered on top of earlier skin color masquerades, and about colorism in Jamaican society. Smith was most known for her brown skin, curvy figure, long blond wigs, skimpy bustier-type outfits with boots and accessories, all staples in dancehall fashions to this day. Smith's influence was far and wide with many dark-skinned Black women vying to get the latest dancehall fashion, including lightening their dark skin with skin bleaching creams for a bleached-brown appearance, wearing long straight blond wigs, and even taking hormone pills (chicken pills) to gain enough weight to look like Smith as the Dancehall Queen (Barnes 102). Titles of Dancehall Queens and Kings are usually earned and held by dark-skinned Black people who have been in dancehall for years and are known for their exceptional dance skills (Niaah 138). Although Smith was a dancer, she did not rise through the ranks in dancehall dance competitions to earn her title of "Dancehall Queen" (Niaah 138). She simply reappropriated the title, and started performing publicly in Jamaica, across the Caribbean, and around the world.

Nonetheless, Smith's presence as a "browning" in dancehall was certainly reminiscent of the "Brown Girls" in Brown Girls Balls, the "sets" of brown skin in Set Girls and John Canoe masquerades, triggering the memory and present conditions of colorism to the point of Black people masquerading as "brown" in dancehall, and continuing even so into the present, all inspired by Smith's first appearance in the 1990s. Dancehall has always been a dark-skinned, Black working class space as in "downtown," representing the inner city of Kingston, where mostly Black people reside. Smith's light-skinned brown skin was associated with the upper- and middle-classes as "uptown," representing north Kingston and upper St. Andrew where mostly Brown and white people reside. Kingston, and all of Jamaica in the 1990s, was still divided by skin color and racism. Smith stood out as a spectacle in dancehall as a "browning" or "Brown girl." This out-of-context skin color in dancehall was central to Smith's appeal as she drew flocks of Black people just to get a glimpse of the "browning" Dancehall Queen. Ironically, Smith complained about being harassed for being a "browning" in dancehall. She quipped, "I have women come up to me to tell me, I am where I am because I'm Brown – and I am where I'm at because I'm from uptown – I am where I'm at because of this and I am where I'm at because of that" ("Personal Interview"). Smith said that all she ever wanted to do was to bring "uptown" and "downtown" together, maybe in an attempt to heal the fractures of skin color and colorism with dancehall ("Personal Interview").

To this end, skin color as spectacle in dancehall has always been part of the broader concept of masquerade, which as an umbrella term in cultural performance includes parades, pageants, spectacles, carnivals, balls, fetes, festivals, rituals, social interactions, aesthetic practices (McKenzie 29). Dancehall is a masquerade because of the spectacle of the event, complete with dressing up for performance. Victor Turner defines performance from the old French word, *parfournir* which means "to accomplish" a task (13). By the 1500s, the French word, *parfournir* was used in English as "performance" (777). Erving Goffman conceptualizes performance in everyday life with the "self" in a series of "theatrical performances" that adjusts to various everyday settings and "plots" (104). Goffman theorizes that an individual will "perform" one way in public, and another way in private. For example, persons will perform differently at work, than they do in a bar, or in a religious

<sup>8</sup> In contemporary usage brown skin is gendered as "brown man" for men; and "browning" for women, as referenced for Carlene Smith as the browning Dancehall Queen.

ceremony. The same is true historically in terms of brown skin being preferential, hence the state-sponsored parades that communicated to enslaved Africans the privilege of brown skin in society and in public displays.

Today, Black people's reactions to brown-skinned privilege is priceless with cynical acts and playfulness in dancehall as masquerade. Carolyn Cooper illustrates masquerading in dancehall as "exhibitionism conceals ordinary imperfections" (2004, 127). In the dancehall world of make-believe, old roles can be contested and new identities assumed. Indeed, the elaborate styling of both hair and clothes is a permissive expression of the pleasures of disguise. In the words of Diva Sandra Lee [a dancehall diva]: "The [hair] extension[s] add a movie look to us. ... Is like a disguise. I want to look different tomorrow" ("The British Link Up Crew" 127). Masquerading in dancehall takes on a life of its own when playing with skin color. Donna Hope uses the concept of masquerade to describe a performance of masculinity as bravado in London's British Link-Up Crew, a Jamaican dancehall event in London, England ("The British Link Up Crew" 108–109). My focus is on brown skin as masquerade, primarily with Brown women with reference to Brown men, and skin bleaching as caricature of colorism in Jamaica's society. In masquerading the skin, masqueraders get to augment their reality, shift and change outcomes, and communicate through caricature in this elaborate performance in dancehall.

What happens when one culture dominates another in systems of power, for example in colonialism and slavery? Diana Taylor argues that Latin American performance is transculturation, "the transformative process undergone by all societies as they came into contact with, and acquire foreign cultural material, whether willingly or unwillingly" (10). Taylor refers to the history of the Conquistadors in the Spanish conquest of the Americas, especially in Mexico and Peru, in articulating concepts of the archive and repertoire. Archival memory "exists as documents, maps, literary texts, letters, archaeological remains, bones, videos, films, CDs, all those items supposedly resistant to change" (Taylor 19). From studying archival memory, performance scholars can analyze culturally specific performances in Latin America. Taylor further argues that a repertoire is traceable within Latin American archival memory, the history of interactions between colonial powers and Indigenous peoples (Taylor 19). Caribbean masquerades, and Jamaican masquerades on the other hand, are palimpsests that go further than the repertoire and archival memory to create new masquerades atop of layers of old masquerades that still shows through. Although the contexts may seem to change over time in palimpsests, the original contexts are always seen underneath the new ways. For example, the original context of the Brown Girls Balls and Set Girls parades with the gradations of brown skin on display, still peek through the bleached-brown skin in a satirical protest of colorism through the ages.

Studying Jamaican masquerades as palimpsests is a project of recontextualization and reinterpretation of British colonial writings of these festivities from the seventeenth to mid-twentieth centuries; and in many cases, the neo colonial writings from the dominant colonial discourse that silenced the voices of colonized and enslaved peoples. "History is written by the victors" as the saying goes (Phelan), as is the case in colonial accounts of masquerades. Enslaved Africans used orality in songs, speech, music, and dance, but this has only been gleaned from a colonial perspective. I explore the idea of the masquerading body and skin as a text, or scroll to decolonize Black and Brown bodies in colonial writings. For Susan Leigh Foster, "a body, whether sitting writing or standing thinking or walking talking or running screaming, is a bodily writing" (3). I contend that what was left behind by Black and Brown people in historical masquerades was a "bodily writing" in rewriting, and reinterpreting the past in song, dance, gestures, and what was done or undone to Black and Brown skins. I utilize performance historiography, defined as deciphering how history was written, by whom, and why; and then I reinterpret the history of masquerades by filling in the silences of Black and Brown people who were compelled to perform in British colonial-sponsored festivities during the slavery and plantation eras in order to understand current skin color displays in dancehall.

### **Queen Elizabeth I (1558–1603), Skin Whitening Make-Up, and *Limpieza de Sangre***

Skin "whitening" or bleaching first emerged among Europeans during the reign of Queen Elizabeth I (1558–1603) of England. The Queen was known for her pale white skin and red curly hair, becoming a fashion icon, trend, and beauty standard in England during the Elizabethan period and across Europe (Blay 4–6). She used a lead-based makeup known as Venetian Ceruse or "the spirits of Saturn," which was a mixture of vinegar, lead, powders, and paints applied to the skin for a white porcelain appearance (Blay 6; Charleston). The British aristocracy emulated Queen Elizabeth's pale white skin with this skin whitening makeup, so did her subjects, and all of Europe (Blay 6). She ordered the expulsion of Blacks in England in a letter and warrant of July 1596 and in January 1601, introducing the concept of *limpieza de sangre* ("purity of blood") (Lowe 9). Hence, from my perspective, the Queen was obsessed with whiteness as "purity of blood" to the point of wearing a literal white-face as seen in the Queen's coronation portrait in 1600 (see **Figure 2**), and other portraits throughout her life.



**Figure 2:** The Coronation Portrait 1600 from: English Artist, Unknown. "Queen Elizabeth I." *Daily Art Magazine*, 7 May 2021. Queen Elizabeth I's coronation portrait showing a powdery white face from the lead-based makeup, Venetian ceruse, made popular by the Queen who created the appearance of the fairest, whitest skin, probably to distinguish herself as without Black blood in Britain at the time.

Ironically, the Queen's obsessive use of the skin whitening makeup, many believe, led to her untimely death. I think the Queen was probably so Black phobic that she used white leaded makeup to distinguish herself from the taint of "black" blood in Britain and thence she expelled all Black Africans, called "Blackmoores," and "Negroes" from her midst. Christopher A. D. Charles states that by the seventeenth century, British colonists on Jamaican sugar plantations were using creams and makeup to whiten their already light skin, probably trying to rub away any suspicion of "impurity" from "interracial sex" between British planters and African women in the colony (375). Many Europeans found it necessary to maintain the actual "white" on their skins with lead makeup to distinguish themselves from enslaved Africans' "black" skin. Charles notes that eventually some enslaved Africans on seventeenth century plantations in Jamaica started emulating or mimicking British elites by bleaching their dark skins with whitening creams and makeup (375).

However, to suggest some sort of psychosis by enslaved Africans who were lightening their dark skins in captivity seems trite, and would even revictimize enslaved Africans who were barely surviving a brutal regime of enslavement on sugar plantations. In addition, it is difficult to say exactly why enslaved Africans were following European skin whitening. Maybe enslaved Africans were just following what Europeans did with their make-up and fashion of the day, or maybe enslaved Africans were mocking white planters who sought to be distinctly "white" and "pure" from the Black slave population. I would believe the latter, given the ways in which Black people have always used masquerades as satirical protests. Just as enslaved Africans were lightening their skins with chemical agents on Jamaican sugar plantations, it is plausible to conceive

of skin bleaching among enslaved Africans during the times of John Canoe masquerades, and even the Set Girls processions, especially after studies show the prevalence of skin bleaching as early as the seventeenth century on sugar plantations in Jamaica (Charles 375–376).

### "Balls at Kingston to the 'Brown Girls'" – Brown Girls Balls (late eighteenth century)

How the Brown Girls Balls began is lost in intrigue and time and involved the British colony of Jamaica, the French, Spanish, and the recently independent United States of America. The "balls at Kingston to the 'Brown Girls'" or Brown Girls Balls began around 1782 as a celebration of the British Royal Navel's victory in the Battle of Saintes, led by Admiral Sir George Rodney, lasting four days from April 9–12, off the coast of Dominica (Lewis 382; Hill 238–239). The French and Spanish joined forces in a plot to help the US to defeat the British Navel Squadron in New York, then to go on to capture the British Windward Islands, including Jamaica (McGrath 389). Upon Admiral Rodney's victory over the Franco-Spanish invasion of the West Indies, and especially in protecting Jamaica for the British Empire, Rodney returned to Jamaica a hero (Hill 238–239).

This single event with the Battle of the Saintes victory in 1782 may have led to the emergence of the Brown Girls Ball that became an annual affair to the late eighteenth to early nineteenth century (Hill 238–239). Eighteenth century British Royal navy ranks were divided into three main squadrons according to seniority with red, white, and blue (Blake and Lawrence 78). Admirals were appointed to each squadron, for example, Admiral of the Red, Admiral of the White, Admiral of the Blue, and further divided in nine bands, with the Admiral of the Fleet as the tenth and most senior rank (Blake and Lawrence 78). The navy ranks, "Admiral of the Red" and "Admiral of the Blue," held separate balls in Kingston for Brown women, with red representing the English, and blue representing the Scots with Brown women competing with the most fanciful gowns, dance, song, and in the fairest of brown skins (Senior 145).

The Brown Girls Balls were lavish and competitive affairs. The Brown women, many of whom would have been enslaved or free, wore the latest European fashions in either red or blue—according to navy rank—with accessories that were sponsored and selected at the behest of the British Royal Navy; and by all accounts, they seemed to have been on an "exotic" display of brown skin colors.



**Figure 3:** A Grand Jamaica Ball! or the Creolean hop a la muftee; as exhibited (sic) in Spanish Town (1802) from: Holland, William. *Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division Washington, D.C. 20540 USA.* The picture shows a ball in Jamaica with white elites, enslaved African musicians, and servers.

In **Figure 3**, Satirist painter, William Holland (1782–1817) captures a Jamaican nineteenth century ball “A Grand Jamaica Ball! Or the Creolean hop a la muftee; as exhibited [sic] in Spanish Town” published in 1802, providing some clues to the atmosphere and mood of British balls. This image is indicative of how brown skin as masquerade is caricatured in Holland’s interpretation to provide a glimpse of these balls. Lucille Mathurin Mair comments that English lawyer William Hickey in his memoirs observed with wonder at how Brown women (mulattoes and quadroons) in their fancy-dressed splendor would attend Spanish Town balls, much like Holland’s “A Grand Jamaica Ball!” in Spanish Town, Jamaica (281). In his fascination, Hickey stated that “[Brown] Girls of this description... are frequently to be procured, though at a monstrous expense” suggesting the possible selection of Brown women for purchase as mistress (quoted in Mair 281).

In this picture, British colonials are on the dance floor in groups of possibly Brown women and white men, dressed in the finest fashions of the time, including pastel empire silhouette chemise dresses for women, short curly updos and with feathered hats. Men wore linen shirts, long-tailed coats, knee breeches and curled wiglets. Black waiters serve bottles of wine to the company. Upstairs on the balcony to the left are Black violinists, who would have been enslaved at this time. To the right, are white horn and oboe players, and to their right is a black cymbal player. In the center of the balcony are what looks like white men and women spectators. All the whites and Brown women are wearing fancy dress in the latest European fashion of the day, all looking festive with broad smiles.

Under the balcony to the left is a group of enslaved Africans smudged into the background with bare feet and tattered clothes observing a typical ball from the outskirts. On the wall to the left is a monarchic painting, possibly of Queen Charlotte of England judging by the time of Holland’s painting. The picture includes a six-line verse with a warning to (Brown) women against “loose living” because they were believed to be sexually available to white men, and the main fixture at these balls. Then the most disturbing part of Holland’s interpretation, is the sexual assault taking place to the right of the picture, upstairs on the balcony behind the red curtain and next to the Black cymbal player. A white man is assaulting a woman with his hand on her breasts. I assume that the woman is a Brown woman in the context of Brown women at these balls. The Brown woman is in distress; and no one even notices the assault with all the festivities. So inconspicuous is this assault that viewers, like the distracted revelers below, would not see it at the top right of the picture. The underlying subtext in Holland’s satirical view of a typical ball is the sexual availability and assault of Brown women at the whims of white men.

### Skin Color, Gender, and Desireability

Historically, in the Caribbean skin color has been associated with gender, race, and desireability. Skin color was reflected in public spectacles in Jamaica where “femininity” and “masculinity” were traits and characteristics to describe behaviors perceived to be determined by one’s skin color. For example, “masculinity” in racialized language referred to having dark skin, stereotypically viewed as “uncivilized,” “close to nature,” and “unbridled sexuality” (Kempadoo 36, 80; hooks 127–128). Kempadoo noted that “black femininity was often represented as naturally ‘hot constitution’d’, and sensuous in an animal-like way, lacking all the qualities that defined ‘decent’ womanhood or women of ‘purity of blood’” (31). “Femininity,” on the other hand, was synonymous with whiteness as the “pinnacle of femininity” for white women (Kempadoo 36, 80; hooks 127). V. Spike Peterson and Anne Sisson Runyan argue that “gender is typically racialized (models of masculinity and femininity vary among Africans, Indians, Asians, Europeans) and race is gendered (gender stereotypes shape racial stereotypes of ‘Africans’, ‘Indians’, ‘Asians’, ‘Whites’)” (29). Sally Kitch goes further to note that “theorists also agree that ideologies of race and gender are strongly, or even inextricably, interconnected, so that it is more helpful to think about *genderized race or racialized gender* than to think about the two terms separately” (2). In many ways, the British-sponsored masquerades like Set Girls parades and John Canoe coalesced and reinforced gendered race in skin color, especially in valuing brown skin throughout the slavery era.

In Jamaican masquerades, for example, British colonists displayed Brown women in a spectacle of skin color where light skin signified closeness to white femininity (Kempadoo 31). Kempadoo observed that the combination of European and African backgrounds produced “notions of light-skinned women who could almost pass for white yet [retain] a tinge of color as well as a hint of wantonness and uninhibited sexuality of exotic cultures” (36–37). She explained that the Brown or “mulatto woman (*la mulata*) thus came to be represented as erotic and sexually desirable yet was outcast and pathologized and defined as economically attractive for slave masters. The mulatto woman emerged thus during slavery as the symbol of the prostitute—the sexually available socially despised, yet economically profitable body” (6). The figure of *la mulata* could be seen in Carlene, “The Dancehall Queen,” during the 1990s. *La Mulata* as “socially despised” was pervasive in Smith’s case. Many scholars missed Smith’s significance as “browning,” “Brown Girl,” and the *la mulata* trope.

In an editorial in the *Jamaica Gleaner*, Cooper was critical of Smith for using her light-skinned privilege to take over dancehall space, associated with the Black working-class (1E). Belinda Edmondson argued that the brown body of *la mulata* is so sexualized that it is an erotic spectacle anywhere, but especially in dancehall, again most associated with Black working-class. Edmondson went on to suggest that "dancehall moves" were somehow for dark-skinned bodies. (7). Gina Ulysse claims to have observed how "Carlene [Smith] even went to the point of simulating an orgasm, much to the delight, shock, and surprise of the audience, and the show ended with Carlene's downtown crew *winin'* on their heads while wearing minimal pieces of fishnet, lace, and nylon lingerie" (162). One aspect of dancehall includes eroticism with sexually suggestive and explicit dances such as pretend copulation. Eroticism in dance and song derived from earlier John Canoe dances and songs that featured pretend sexual intercourse (Ryman 110; Cooper 19–35). It is possible that Ulysse observed one of these dances of pretend copulation, since Smith vehemently denies ever simulating an orgasm in any of her shows (Personal Interview). John Canoe dances are palimpsests for dancehall dances, including pretend copulation, and even the popular John Canoe butterfly dance, re-popularized by Smith as the reemerged "Brown Girl." Foster reiterates that "each of the body's moves, as with all writings, traces the physical fact of movement and also an array of references to conceptual entities and events" (3). History is embodied in masquerades; and each gesture is from an earlier gesture, revitalized and renewed.

Some scholars have debated skin color with "desireability," especially during the slavery era. However, I hasten to note that any imbalance of power between white masters and enslaved Black and Brown women was not so much about desire, but about sexual exploitation, abuse, and rape. Even if a relationship between a white master and enslaved Black woman appeared consensual, it was a complex arrangement of power, and not one to be romanticized. Slave masters coerced enslaved Black and Brown women in concubinage (Green 20). In these arrangements, concubines could be afforded certain privileges like better food, medical care, living conditions, fanciful dresses, slaves if she so wish, education for her off-springs from such sexual liaisons, and possibly to inherit her white master's wealth, and a pension (Green 20; Mathurin Mair 283–284). Desire by skin color, imposed by white patriarchy, was at the heart of oppression in colorism as it suggested different types of "desires" or attractiveness based on skin color; it was a sexual playground for white planters. Desire by skin color probably encouraged skin bleaching outside of dancehall that remained popular throughout the decades with skin bleaching ads well into the mid twentieth century and beyond, encouraging mostly Black women to lighten their dark skins to become "attractive" and "sexually appealing" to potential spouses (Charles 375). However, the notion of desireability was founded on the deeply oppressive white patriarchal sexual exploitation of Black and Brown people for sport.

Lady Nugent's journal from the early nineteenth century provided nuanced views of whiteness in Jamaica (Mohammed 33). As Patricia Mohammed observes, Lady Maria Nugent often spoke disparagingly of white women in Jamaica, referring to them as "yellow" women (33). "Yellow" women were white women who were born in the colony, also known as white Creoles. Lady Maria Nugent was a white American born in New Jersey, USA in 1771 to a family who supported Britain, considered loyalists, during the American War of Independence (1775–1783). The family emigrated to England after the war; and Maria later married British General, Sir George Nugent, who became the Governor of Jamaica from 1801 to 1806 (Levy, "Jamaica Journal Gives View of Slavery"). Lady Nugent started a journal in April 1801 just before arriving in Jamaica, and throughout her time there she busied herself with domestic matters, even during the ongoing unrest and threats of slave uprisings in Jamaica and other European colonies. Haiti had just declared their Independence from France in the Haitian Revolution in 1801, led by Touissant L'Overture and other freedom fighters like Dutty Boukman. There were numerous naval wars between Britain and France ensuing, and even the threat of Jamaica being overtaken. All the while, Governor Nugent went to great lengths to quell tensions and rebellions, as he managed the sugar industry, overseeing enslaved Africans in sugarcane fields (Levy 2015).

White creole society and plantocracy in the Caribbean were not as ostentatious as the American South's plantocracy (Green 5). In British colonies in the Caribbean, great houses were small dwellings, often make-shift, compared to the well-built sugar factories; whereas, in the American South, great houses were palatial (Green 5). Europeans in the British colony were more concerned with economic productivity than about permanence. Many would have retired to England after decades of business in Jamaica. Some of them lived out their lives in the colony, especially small landowners, overseers, merchants and others, and adopted a distinctly Creole culture that repelled European visitors, like Lady Nugent. However, European visitors' disdain for white Creoles in the colony did not detract from the highly stratified racial and skin color casting in place in Jamaica at the time. Jamaican white Creole society consisted of four highly stratified classes: whites, free people of color afforded certain privileges, free people of color without privileges, and enslaved Africans (Green 3). British and other European visitors quite often were suspicious of how "pure white" white Creoles were; and about

their "poor" manners and etiquette, and even the "drawl" in their speech (Nugent 98), still heard today in the white Jamaican accent. Lady Nugent, the governor's wife who was born in America, and emigrated to Britain, observed in the early 1800s in the British colony of Jamaica that "many of the ladies, who have not been educated in England, speak a sort of broken English, with an indolent drawling out of their words, that is very tiresome if not disgusting" (Nugent 98). It is important to note that Lady Nugent's scorn was, in part, because of her status as the Governor's wife. But, this was the general behavior among white groups who strived to distance themselves from mixing or suspected mixed groups in order to uphold white supremacy at all costs.

Jamaican playwright, director, and founder of Sistren Collective, Honor Ford-Smith who was born in 1951 in Quebec, Canada to a Brown Jamaican woman and white British man, is considered to be "Jamaica white" or "near white" in Jamaica. Ford-Smith's perspectives on racism and colorism, gleaned through her grandmother's stories, shed some light on Jamaica's white Creole society. Ford-Smith explains that her grandmother was the daughter of a white planter and Black maid in Jamaica, and how her grandmother's experiences "formed" and made her "terrified of the boundaries that existed in the [Jamaican] society around class and color" (Ford-Smith). Ford-Smith said that her grandmother would remind her that she may look white, but that she was not really white, as if to admonish her about her place in the skin color hierarchy. Ford-Smith calls her grandmother's experience a "science of race that didn't make any sense." I think "race as a science" is so apt in describing how white Creole society judged each other within, and outside of the colony, as a way to uphold whiteness. The "science of race," as Ford-Smith puts it, kept white Creole people in line, even with distinguishing the registers of whiteness for those who were white or "near white," maintained by white supremacist rules of conduct, place, status, and impenetrable boundaries.

### **"Sets" of Skin Color and *Junkunnu*/*Jonkunnu*/*John Canoe***

Later, the Brown Girls Balls spilled out into the streets in skin color parades called "Set Girls" parades where the Brown women paraded according to "sets" of brown skin. This indicates that the practice of grouping Brown women in sets of brown skin would have started as a novel sort of performance for British colonials who were fascinated with the various shades of brown skin in the racial groupings of *mulattoes* and *quadroons*, and various black/white mixtures. Brown Girls Balls went out into the streets as Set Girls parades; and soon, they were incorporated in the annual John Canoe masquerades (Senior 145). John Canoe, from the original *Junkunnu*, is a masquerade performed in Jamaica, Belize, Bermuda, St Kitts and Nevis, Guyana, and the Bahamas during the Christmas season (Richards 254). *Junkunnu* was also performed during the antebellum period in North Carolina in the United States (Richards 267–268). *Junkunnu* is derived from masquerade traditions of West African male and female secret societies of the Egungun, Popo and Sande (Ryman 112). The term *Junkunnu* refers to the sound of combined words from the Ewe language in East Ghana and Togo including *dzono*, which means sorcerer, and *kunu*, which means "deadly," and *nu*, which means "man."<sup>9</sup> Therefore, *Junkunnu* could mean "deadly sorcerer" or "sorcerer man," originating in secret societies (Senior 85).

In Jamaica, *Junkunnu* dates back to the late seventeenth century when people from West Africa were taken to Jamaica as slaves, and first recorded and observed by Sir Hans Sloane (Ryman 111). At that time, British planters and slave owners gave enslaved Africans a few days off before harvesting season to celebrate Christmas (Senior 84; Richards 254). Enslaved Africans took their rest days for merriment and *Junkunnu* from Christmas Day through to the New Year. What was once an African-centered Egungun masquerade in *Junkunnu*, had transformed into a state-controlled British-styled masquerade (Wilmot 65). The British colonial system had taken over *Junkunnu*, anglicizing it to "John Canoe" (Senior 84–85), from henceforth, referred to as "John Canoe masquerade" or just "John Canoe."

John Canoe subsequently included British dances like Morris dancing, jigs, polkas, and reels (Senior 145). Many of the costumed characters in John Canoe derived from English mummery, a costumed procession since the Medieval European period, consisting of characters with animal heads like cow head, horse head, goat head, and others incorporated in John Canoe as a stamp of British dominance in masquerades (Senior 85). Horse head characters, however, can also be traced to the Efik of eastern Nigeria (Ryman 113), revealing how both British and African influences converged with British dominance over African elements during the slavery and plantation era. In total, John Canoe had at least seventy costumed characters played by Black men, including Wild and Tame Indian, Warrior, Police Man, Executioner, Devil, Champion, Reindeer, Monkey,

<sup>9</sup> Other spellings and pronunciations for *Junkunnu* include *Jonkunno*, *Jonkunnu*, *Jukunno*, and *Jankunu* (Bilby 179). "John Canoe" is the anglicized British name given to the African masquerade in Jamaica, including the created British character, Jaw Bone or House John Canoe in white mask, carrying a plantation house on his head (discussed more fully in Figure 4).

Flower Girl, Pregnant or Belly Woman, Babu, Whore Gal, Sailor, and Royal Sets that included Queen, Queen-Granddaughter, Prince, and Royal Courtiers (Ryman 111–112).

John Canoe character, Pitchy Patchy, is closely associated as a retention of Egungun masks, covered from head to toe with strips and patches of brightly colored fabric of red, yellow, blue, orange, and floral blends (Ryman 112). Another African-based character is the stilt walker, similar to Moko Jumbie in Trinidad Carnival from Yoruba retention with *Moko*, the Orisha of "fate and retribution" (Ryman 112; Martin 290). Other John Canoe characters most influenced by English masquerades were Actor Boys, played by enslaved and newly freed Black Jamaican actors who competed in the popular Actor Boy contests to recite passages from William Shakespeare's play, *King Richard III* during the John Canoe festivities (Sussman 301). The Actor Boy character wore fanciful European costumes from the seventeenth century that were bright-colored, floral and striped patterned, with an elaborate headdress with large feathers decorated with beads and sequins, at least three feet high. The Actor Boy wore a white mask to appear white, with a long curly wig from the period, black stockings and shoes with big blue bows, and usually carried a whip or decorated fan (Sussman 301). In **Figure 4**, the Actor Boy is flanked by John Canoe musicians playing drums and fife. In the background, the Creole women of varying complexions are dressed in fancy dress with scarves, hats with ribbons, earrings and beaded necklaces. Black men are dressed in striped shirts, long and short pants, hats, with and without shoes.



**Figure 4:** Koo Koo, Or Actor Boy (1837–1838) from: Belisario, Isaac Mendes. *Meisterdrucke*. John Canoe Masquerade in Kingston, Jamaica.

Yet another character in John Canoe, representative of John Canoe as the event persona was "Jaw Bone, or House John Canoe," played by a Black man in a white mask with a brown curly wig carrying a large white plantation house on his head (at least three feet high.) In **Figure 5**, the character wears a red navy jacket with shiny buttons, probably representing the Admiral of the red navy rank colors. He is dressed in blue striped pants with tassels down the side of the pants, and a long waistband and tie. Jaw Bone represents the British plantocracy with the plantation house on his head with his legs as if he were doing the Morris dancing, a popular English dance. Jamaican society, then and now, was highly complex and stratified by racial classification and skin color (Richards 255), as noted in both characters, "Koo Koo, or Actor Boy" and "Jaw Bone or House John Canoe," the most English of representations in John Canoe during those times.



**Figure 5:** Jaw Bone, Or House John Canoe (1837–1838) from: Belisario, Isaac Mendes. *Meisterdrucke*. John Canoe Masquerade, Kingston, Jamaica.

The most fascinating feature in this anglicized John Canoe, was the gradation of skin colors when the Set Girls paraded in John Canoe, leaving a legacy of color casting in contemporary Jamaican society at large. This process of sorting groups by the gradation of skin reveals the repetition of power over time during slavery through to today. As early as 1776, "sets" of women were divided by shade of skin and were dressed in the same lavish costumes with lace, beads, and frills (Senior 144–145). The groups were given colors like the Yellow Set, Blue Set, and Red Set, representing colors from the Royal Navy. However, the most popular were the rival Blue and Red Set girls of Kingston from the original Admiral of the Blue and Admiral of Red—"both of them gave balls at Kingston to the "Brown Girls": for the fair sex elsewhere are called the "Brown Girls" in Jamaica. In consequence of these balls all Kingston was divided into parties: from thence the division spread into other districts; and ever since, the whole island, at Christmas, is separated into rival factions of the Blues and the Reds ..." (Lewis 382).

When the Scottish writer and sugar plantation manager, Michael Scott, lived in Jamaica from 1806 to 1822, he observed with some fascination, the Set Girls processions through the eyes of his character, Tom Cringle in *Tom Cringle's Log* (1836).

But the beautiful part of the exhibition was the Set Girls. They danced along the streets in bands of fifteen to thirty. There were brown sets, and black sets, and sets of all intermediate gradations of [skin] colour... I had never seen more beautiful creatures that there were amongst the brown sets – clear olive complexions, and fine faces elegant carriages, splendid figures, – full, plump, and magnificent. ... But the colors were never blended in the same set – no blackie ever interloped with the browns, nor did the browns in any case mix with the sables – always keeping in mind – black woman – brown lady. (214–215)

Each "set" Brown woman was uniformly dressed in the same color costumes with frills, lace, necklaces, and earrings including yellow, green, red, blue and carrying matching parasols sponsored by slave owners and especially white plantation mistresses who had their favorites (Senior 145; Scott 215–216). **Figure 4** shows very subtle shading among the Black women depicted in the well-known color lithograph by Jewish Jamaican artist Isaac Mendes Belisario (1795–1849), a Jamaican artist of Jewish descent, and first Jamaican-born artist on record, who was active in Kingston, Jamaica around the Emancipation years of 1833–1837 ("Isaac Mendes Belisario 1795–1849").

Brown women and their white mistress sponsors prepared costumes in secret in hopes of outdoing other Set Girls' creations (Senior 145). A nineteenth century European spectator remarked at all the jewels worn by Brown women in the Set Girls parade, "I was astonished to see such a display of valuable trinkets—coral and cornelian necklaces, bracelets, etc." (quoted in Franco 58). In the complex relationships among white, Brown and black women, white plantation mistresses would have outfitted the Brown women with the gowns and jewels, although records show that the enslaved Brown women had acquired jewels of their own, through concubinage and prostitution (Franco 68).



**Figure 6:** Red Set Girls and Jack-in-the-Green from: Belisario, Isaac Mendes. *Meisterdrucke*. John Canoe Masquerade, Kingston, Jamaica, 1838.

Beginning at ten and eleven in the morning, this elaborate Brown skin masquerade of Set Girls lasted all day and into the night (Sherlock 48; Hill 241). Black male musicians played fiddles, fifes, and bass drums that kept a 4/4 rhythm, a rattling drum with complex beats, and a grater scraping to four beats (Ryman 113–114). A gumbay drum carried around the neck and a half of a jawbone with teeth that would be scraped with a stick was popular during the nineteenth century (Ryman 113–114). Other instruments included wooden knockers, garden fork, stamping bamboos, bottles, shakas, calabashes; and in early twentieth century, the wheelbase of a car (Ryman 114). Set Girls bands collected money all along the procession for their revels and entertainment, accompanied by the full complement of musicians. Set Girls competed with other Set Girls in costumes, dances, singing, and even in the fairest of skins and beauty, as this was the highpoint of the day (Lewin 52). Rivalry between the Red Set Girls and Blue Set Girls was especially fierce, often leading to physical fights and bloodshed over preference given to the best "set" of Brown girls, always vying for colonial sponsorship in cash or kind (Sherlock 48; Senior 145). Brown women in the Set Girls processions included four Grand Masters, then Adjutants with corresponding red or blue flags.

Next came musicians and singers, then the Commodore, the Queen Ma'am or Queen of the Set, and the Set Girls in respective colors (Lewin 53; Hill 239–240). Then a Jack-in-the-Green, an English folk masquerade character, followed the procession, covered from head to toe in fronds of coconut leaves. Jack-in-the-Green traditionally accompanied chimney sweepers on May 1<sup>st</sup> pageants in England (Sherlock 48), indicative of how English masquerade traditions had imposed upon the once African masquerade tradition of *Junkunnu* (referenced earlier), now anglicized as "John Canoe." The Set Girls in their shades of brown skin, danced and pranced along the streets past the plantation houses, and then white plantation masters and mistresses joined the sets in the dancing and merriment. Set Girls sang and danced with their white slave owners, always segregated by the shade of their skins, appearing happy, as they pleaded to the King of England, George, for their freedom (Hill 239–240). The Set Girls sang, "There is a Regiment of the 64<sup>th</sup> we expect from home/ From London to Scotland away they must go .../ Now pray my noble King if you really love me well/ Disband us from slavery and set us at large..." (quoted in Sherlock 48), reflecting the sad reality of this "festive" affair being constrained to masquerades for British colonists. Even though in captivity in the system of slavery, enslaved people performed skin color for British elites in defiance with these lyrics in song.

Think about how performing skin color for British elites, then, is currently a palimpsest in performing skin color for the system of colorism in contemporary life, with deliberate skin bleaching-brown being a cynical and satirical comment. What is underneath the spectacle of bleached-Brown skin in dancehall today is the palimpsest of an age-old colorist system, and British colonial racial grotesquery in displaying brown skins of enslaved Black and Brown skin people in the eighteenth and nineteenth century masquerades. In palimpsest masquerades, masqueraders are not necessarily aware of, or even have knowledge of historical masquerade palimpsests. What makes the Set Girls a palimpsest for today's bleached-Brown skin in dancehall is the spectacle of brown skin color recontextualized.

Some may be thinking that this historical sorting of skin color happened such a long time ago, and perhaps is not relevant today in a tangible way. But, just last year in February 2020, a white college recruiter in the US was fired for asking a diverse group of high school students to line up by the color of their skin with the commands to "now line up by from the darkest to lightest skin complexion;" and then by "the nappiest hair in the back and straightest hair in the front" ("Recruiter Told Oklahoma Students to Line up by Skin Color"). If this incident could have happened so seamlessly in 2020, imagine how this could have occurred in the early 1800s when British colonists organized Black and Brown people by the gradation of skin color in Set Girls parades.

In addition to "sets" of Brown women, Scott refers to Brown men in the parades of every gradation of skin color, segregated in sets in a pageant of the colonial Kingston Regiment, commissioned as de facto guards to oversee the order of the parades, and to keep skin colors in line (Scott 216). They employed the Kingston Regiment to keep the parade in order, just "in case any of the John Canoes should take fancy to burn or pillage the town, or rise and cut the throats of the masters, or any little innocent recreation of the kind" (Scott 215). The Kingston Regiment marched in organized "sets" of skin colors segregated from white men to Brown men and free Black men, referred to *en bloc* as "Quashie," derived from an Akan day name for a boy child born on Sunday, and derogatively used to describe a whole group of freed or enslaved Africans at the back of the pageant.

British authorities were always nervous about slave uprisings and revolts especially during the festivities. The following illustrates how the skin color order was slavishly maintained and enforced under the terror of whips.

First came a tolerable good band, a little drummy, but still no amiss – well dressed, only the performers being of all colours, from white down to jet-black, had a curious hodge-podge, or piebald

appearance. ...Then this grenadier company of white clerks or the place, very fine-looking young men indeed – another white company followed, not quite so smart looking – ...a phalanx of light browns succeeded, then a company of dark browns, or mulattoes; the regular half-and-half in this, as well as in grog, is the best mixture after all – then quashie himself, or a company of free blacks, who, with the browns, seemed the best soldiers of the set. ... and after blackie the battalion again gradually whitened away, until it ended in a very fine light company of buccras. (Scott, 215–216)

This shows how organized the sets of skin color in parade were to begin first with whites, then light Browns, to dark Browns, and then finally dark-skinned Blacks. Scott observed that after the parade of Blacks, the process continued in the opposite direction with Browns, and then back to *buccras*, a Creole term for whites (216). The concept of skin color masquerades like Set Girls in John Canoe sets finds its way into the popular African American blues singer Big Bill Broonzy's 1952 hit "Black, Brown and White" highlighting how people were treated and excluded from economic opportunities based on skin color: "*They says if you was white, should be all right/If you was brown, stick around/But as you's black, m-mm brother, git back git back git back*" (Broonzy, 1952).

In contrast, Bridget Brereton points out how nineteenth century society in Trinidad and Tobago was delineated by race and color with white Creole elites, "coloreds" and Blacks. Although nineteenth century Trinidad and Tobago's society was stratified by race and skin color like Jamaica's society, Trinidad carnival followed a different masquerade history with the introduction of freed Africans in the French elite carnival at Emancipation (Brereton 53–54). Brereton states that before Emancipation in Trinidad and Tobago, carnival had been a white Creole upper class event complete with masked balls, house-to-house visiting, and promenading (53). At Emancipation, freed Africans and lower classes started participating in carnival, and white upper classes began withdrawing due to obscenities by freed Africans who mocked white elites with traditional mas' characters such as *Pissenlit*, translated as "stinker" or "wet the bed" (Brereton 54–55). *Pissenlits* were masked Black men, cross-dressed as white women in white nightgowns carrying "menstrual cloths" with blood stains, and sexual horseplay (Brereton 55). The difference between John Canoe, Set Girls parades, and Trinidad Carnival was that British authorities imposed and ordered sets of skin colors in Set Girls festivities in John Canoe, pre- and post-Emancipation. Whereas in Trinidad carnival, freed Africans created their own carnival at Emancipation in 1838, later with a host of traditional mas' characters that mocked the colonial system and white elites, many of these characters appearing in white-face, including Devils, Baby doll, Dame Lorraine, and of course, the grotesque *Pissenlit* previously mentioned (Brereton 53–55; Martin 283–286).

What was shocking to me about John Canoe and Set Girls in Jamaica during slavery was how rehearsed the spectacles of skin colors seemed to be. Skin color "sets" were enforced in pre- and post-emancipation festivities organized by authorities. In white imaginations, enslaved Africans and African-descent of every shade were happy and contented in their oppression. This, to ease the oppressors' guilt of this whole affair of enslavement, and the morbid obsession in seeing skin colors parading in "sets." Saidiya Hartman states that performance of Blackness during slavery was often the result of the white misconceptions of the "happy slave" as infantile, hedonistic, and fueling white indifference to Black pain (22). During this time, enslaved African-descended peoples (Black and Brown) sang and danced for *massa* in skin color "sets" or else. Festivities during slavery did not mean that enslaved Black and Brown people had agency. To be clear, the John Canoe was overtaken by British elites; and even in this festive occasion, Black and Brown people did not have a choice in being placed in "sets" of skin color. British colonials organized the sets of skin colors.

### **Black People Disrupting Orderly "Sets"**

In eighteenth and nineteenth century John Canoe, Black men participated among themselves with such sexually explicit dances as "simulated copulation" (Ryman 110). Cheryl Ryman observes in John Canoe, and later in dancehall that

two characters (obviously male) engage in simulated copulation, either with the male standing behind the bent-over female character, sometimes ending the 'act' being performed on the ground, or the simulation being acted out entirely on the ground. The fact that this is not seen as vulgar and is laughed at, and the fact that the two males in Junkunnu performing this kind of act is tolerated by a partially homophobic audience speaks volumes about this particular aesthetic. This aesthetic spills over into perceived bastion of Jamaican homophobic sentiments – the dancehall, where men cross-dress as women in the context of specific 'masks' or characters. These characters are not only tolerated but also celebrated and captured by the video light in the live dance event and in music videos. (110)

Ryman compares dancehall *transvestism* or cross-dressing to homoeroticism in *Junkunnu* (or John Canoe) with cross-dressed male performers who engaged in "simulated copulation, either with the male standing behind the bent over female character, sometimes ending with the 'act' being performed on the ground, or the simulation being acted out entirely on the ground" (110). This could be seen as "acting out" with disorder and eroticism, well known in several masquerades, but especially in the British-sponsored John Canoe, and later in dancehall.

Black women, too, were known for disruptions in John Canoe to unsettle all proceedings in the masquerades, instituted by colonial enforcement in John Canoe with rabbleroising and "vulgar" songs and dances (Wilmot 65). Eighteenth century British writer J.B. Moreton observed Black women singing and *winin'* to John Canoe music. Black women lifted their skirts to *wine*, a dance of rotating the hips, akin to "winding up" the hips while singing about the sexual liaisons between enslaved Black women and white planters: "Hipsaw! My deaa(sic)! You no jig like a-me/You no work him like a-me! You no sweet him like a-me!" Or in another popular song, "Tajo, tajo, tajo! my Mackey massa!/O! laud, O! tajo, tajo, tajo! I'll please my Mackey massa!/I'll jig to Mackey massa! I'll sweet my Mackey massa!" (quoted in Cooper 2004, 156–157). Moreton, who was quite entranced by these *winin'* dances, remarked that "I sometimes imagined they were on springs or hinges from the hips downward; whoever is most active and expert at wriggling, is reputed the best dancer" (quoted in Cooper 2004, 157). Many John Canoe songs were derisive, cynical, and sarcastic about how race and colorism affected Black women who had no other recourse but to "act out" with eroticism in song and dance, revealing Black women's survival over sexual violence and exploitation.

Cooper illustrates how in the popular nineteenth century John Canoe song "Massa Bacra," or white slave master, shows his sexual preferences and treatment of his women from "white," to "browns," and "blacks:" "But Massa Bacra have white love/Soft and silken like one dove/To brown girl – him barely shivel! –/To black girl – ho, Lord, de Devil!" (quoted in Cooper 1995, 24). This John Canoe song reflects skin color categories as integral in the construction of race and white patriarchy following a "gradual path from the soft, silken dove of his white love, to the brown girl, and, ultimately, we may presume, to the black devil herself" (Cooper 1995, 23). John Canoe songs mocked the sex acts between enslaved African women and British men, revealing the sexual politics of skin color in everyday life. John Canoe songs in the festive parades show the pain of how white, Brown, and Black women were treated according to the subtle shades of skin, and they sang and *wined* against colorism, under the threats of punishment to masquerade or else.

John Canoe songs detailed accounts of the day-to-day sexual politics among white, Brown, and Black women, and the abuses within each group. That enslaved African women were singing and dancing about skin color (white, Brown, Black), and sexual abuse, not desire, reveals yet the unspoken horrors in song and dance. Black and Brown masqueraders, not in "sets," had engaged in obscene dances, sexual horseplay, and *transvestism* to unsettle the masquerade, so much so that European elites began associating John Canoe with "debauchery and demoralization" (Wilmot 65). Disruptive behaviors with the eroticism in song and dance were cries for help and signs of resistance against the ordered skin color parades, instituted by British colonials. Any so-called transgressive acts in dancehall today, whether they be dances with pretend sexual intercourse, *transvestism*, or explicit and risqué lyrics are all acts of protest against systems and codifications of racism and colorism from the past, now caught up to the present.

Hector Mitchell, the Mayor of Kingston around that time in 1838–1841, described John Canoe masquerades as "disgusting orgies of African barbarism" (Wilmot 65), associating sexually-charged dances as "African," a word that had become associated with rebellious and disorderly behavior in John Canoe. For the newly freed Africans, the "African" suggests a level of African consciousness that so offended British elites who sought to suppress anything too "Black" and "African," including the so-called "disgusting orgies" in dances and songs, (Wilmot 65; Senior 85). Eventually, Mayor Mitchell abruptly banned John Canoe during the Christmas festivities in 1841 leading to the John Canoe Riot of December 27, 1841. Revelers took to the streets stoning the police, who opened fire killing two people and injuring many more (Wilmot 72). The Mayor took refuge in a ship in Kingston Harbour during the unrest; and he later ordered the army to quell the riot before order was restored (Senior 85; Wilmot 72).

Upon the 1841 ban, John Canoe masqueraders retreated to rural areas in Jamaica to continue the annual John Canoe, but no longer with state support. John Canoe declined to a small scale, but reverted to a more African-based Egungun masquerade with the retentive Pitchy Patchy character as one of the main features, both for religious and secular entertainment (Ryman 115). Interestingly, Set Girls parades ended, probably because the British elites had instituted skin color displays to begin with; Black people must have had enough of seeing sets of Brown Girls that reinforced ensuing colorism in the society. Other British-influenced

characters had soon become extinct, including the Jack-in-the-Green, Koo Koo or Actor Boy, and Jaw Bone or House John Canoe performed in white masks. It was probably more likely that newly freed Africans and "colored" people stopped masquerading overtly British-influenced characters to take back John Canoe. However, John Canoe kept some courtly British characters like Kings, Queens, and attendants, but transformed into African modes of performances. In fact, the idea of Kings and Queens in masquerades has survived all the way to dancehall today with titles of "King of Dancehall" and "Queen of Dancehall" bearing resemblance to earlier masquerade characters and modes.

In addition to the small-scale John Canoe in rural areas, other processional masquerades emerged from John Canoe such as Bruckins or Bruckins Party, Queen Party and Brag having direct lineage to contemporary dancehall (Ryman 114). Ryman states that Bruckins emerged out of the spirit of rivalry between the Red and Blue Set Girls, led by Bruckins Kings and Queens. However, Bruckins did not feature the skin color displays of the earlier Set Girls parades in John Canoe during slavery. Bruckins later developed into Queen Party and Brag, an exclusively Black women's masquerade that focused on an elaborately-costumed Queen with her daughters and granddaughters that did not entail skin color displays. The Queen was accompanied by two attendants who hit sticks above the Queen's head during the procession (Ryman 114–115). The Queen was veiled for secrecy with a custom of "auctioning" for her to enter the space, for onlookers to peek under her veil, and for her to leave the space (Ryman 114–115). Brag was the processional dance of the Queen Party, performed by the Queen and entourage (Ryman 115). Another masquerade included Buru or Burru that emerged out of these earlier processional masquerades as musical bands, going from house to house of important community leaders, playing and singing during the pre-Independence era from 1940s to 1950s (Ryman 115). Buru or Burru is derived from a Twi word, *Bru* from Ashanti people, some of whom were enslaved in Jamaica, which means "to destroy or pillage" (Murrell 234). I know that Black Jamaicans would have used the word burru as intended with a warrior stance against colonialism and oppression. Burru is an Ashanti-Jamaican drumming style deriving from Ashanti talking drums with call and response rhythms; however, Jamaican burru is considered to be more forceful and urgent in a call to action, especially during the pre-Independence years in the 1940s and 1950s (Murrell 240), and in reclaiming the "African" in masquerade practices. By 1951, some one hundred and ten years after the 1841 ban on John Canoe, the Jamaica Gleaner company sponsored John Canoe competitions in an effort to revive the masquerade tradition (Senior 85). Observers noted in 1951 that John Canoe revelers had kept the tradition alive in the rural areas as mentioned earlier, but with more African modes of performance. Interestingly, there was no sign of brown skin color "sets" from Set Girls parades.

### **The Bleached-Brown Skins of Dancehall to Vybz Kartel**

And so, over a hundred years later, Brown Girls Balls, Set Girls parades, and John Canoe are palimpsests for contemporary dancehall, laying the foundation for the current iterations in the bleached Brown-skins of dancehall. Black Jamaicans were mostly in poverty at Emancipation in 1838, without land, access, resulting in generational wealth gaps, and mass migrations to Latin America, North America and Europe for employment opportunities and a better life. Black Jamaicans who stayed in Jamaica, moved from the rural areas to Kingston for work and opportunities during this time. This led to overcrowded living conditions and poverty in inner city Kingston. Others built make-shift housing like shacks on "capture" land in rural areas for housing. "Capture" land is land abandoned by wealthy landowners, many of them from descendants from the plantocracy. During Jamaica's colonial years in the early twentieth century to Independence from Britain in 1962, colonial culture promoted Eurocentric beauty ideals of light skin including advertising skin bleaching products in the media (Charles 2011). Even Marcus Garvey's newspaper, *Negro World*, was banned for promoting Black pride, Black beauty in dark skin and hair (Charles 160). Success and beauty were always touted as "brown" and "white" in every area in the society. Ensuing labor relations, strikes, limited access and benefits in the 1940s and 1950s, bolstered skin color divisions among white, Brown, and Black people through to Independence from Britain, and well into the 1980s.

By now, the Kingston and St. Andrew areas were segregated by skin color and class. Colloquially, dark-skin Black people were, and are still often referred to, as a "downtown people," consisting of 75% of the population, living in the inner cities of Kingston, and representing dancehall culture. Brown and white people were, and are still colloquially referred to as "uptown people" representing 25% of the population, consisting of White, Chinese, East Indian, Jewish, Middle Eastern and Brown people, who reside in upper St. Andrew, north of Kingston (Stolzoff 242; Ulysse 151–163; Stanley 132–133). Ian Thomson observes in contemporary Jamaica that

The island's class and racial divides remained stubbornly in place. The problem of the colour-line continues to haunt Jamaica. The lighter your complexion, the more privileged you are likely to be. An insidious "shadism" has ensured that a minority of white (or near white: what Jamaicans call "local white") inhabitants still control the plantations and other industries, while the black population remains separated from the by the powerlessness or poverty of their lives. (5)

It became clear in recent years that the past class and racial divisions of the past had left an indelible mark in contemporary Jamaica, complete with generational wealth gaps, segregated areas, and limited access and opportunities for Black Jamaicans.

It was out of this moment of colorism or "shadism" in the 1990s that Smith emerged in dancehall with variations of her signature style as a futuristic "set" in John Canoe, now known as "crew," which is a group or entourage in dancehall. I believe Smith's reemergence of Brown skin spectacle activated Black people in dancehall to shift the permanence of skin color and colorism on their bodies and skin. Furthermore, Smith's reemergence in a Brown skin masquerade laid latent after the John Canoe ban in 1841, but never really went away in the wider society. Reignited in the intense colorism in Jamaican society from the mid- to late twentieth century, Smith's dancehall performance is a memory of coerced "sets" of skin color in Set Girls parades and John Canoe in present-day colorism in the society. Smith may not have been aware of this history of skin color parades, but knows enough about the privilege of Brown skin in contemporary Jamaican life. She claims that she was trying to bring uptown and downtown together by injecting herself as a "browning" Dancehall Queen in dancehall (Personal Interview). Consequently, several of Smith's enthusiasts began lightening their skins to look like Smith, and to be Brown-looking by artificial means with skin bleaching creams and homemade concoctions (Tucker 2013). However, as time went on, it became clear that this skin bleaching phenomenon in dancehall was actually harkening back to skin color masquerades of the past, with present-day commentaries on colorism.

The current masquerade does not have a processional element of parading in the streets like carnivals do; however, dancehall does contain competitive rivalry, dance, and fashion, similar to the Set Girls rivalry in dance and fancy dress in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. When Smith started her act as "The Dancehall Queen" in the 1990s, she organized fashion competitions known as "fashion clashes" between dancehall dancers from "downtown," and fashion models in modeling agencies from "uptown" (Stolzoff 110). Dancehall fashion clashes are reminiscent of the Red and Blue Set Girls' factions. In dancehall fashion clashes, downtown and uptown models would dance and model down a runway to out-perform each group. Norman Stolzoff states that dancehall women, including Smith, are known as dancehall "divas" or "donnettes" because they design and wear "x-rated," bare-as-you dare costumes to dances (110). Fashion pieces include wigs of all colors, large gold jewelry, mesh tops, and "batty riders," that are pairs of shorts that show more of the buttocks than it covers (Stolzoff 110). Another signature piece is the "puny printer" which is a pair of pants showing the outlines of women's genitalia (Stolzoff 110). Stolzoff observes that dancehall women join together in "crews" as dancehall models to compete among themselves and against professional fashion models in Kingston night clubs (110). Uptown models would be prim and proper in wearing "tasteful" fashions associated with the upper classes.

As referenced earlier, early nineteenth century Scottish writer Michael Scott observed segregated skin color sets in Set Girls' parades. Scott remarked at how "the [skin] colors were never blended in the same set – no blackie ever interloped with the browns, nor did the browns in any case mix with the sables – always keeping in mind – black woman – brown lady" (Scott 214–215). To this day, dancehall parlance refers to dark-skinned Black women as "Black woman;" and light-skinned Brown women are referred to as "Brown lady," indicating the interconnectedness of skin color determined how Black and Brown women were to be perceived, denoting how they were expected to behave as either as "woman" and "lady." It would seem that not much has changed from the days of Set Girls, mirroring the realities of every life. Ulysse argues that contemporary Jamaican society is "invested in maintaining this black/white dichotomy with its specific gender dimensions," especially in prescribed racialized gender roles (151). Ulysse cites anthropologist Lisa Douglass saying "Jamaicans expect 'any female who is white to be a lady and exhibit a consistent feminine demeanor. ... the fairer the female the greater likelihood that she is indeed a lady'" (151), therefore associating femininity with whiteness. In other words, to be feminine, one had to be white. Ulysse's definition of a lady deserves to be quoted at length:

A lady is, by definition, educated and refined. She should always be a wife. Her status derives from matrimony and the extent to which she is devoted to her husband and family. Other characteristics ascribed to her include the femininity that she exudes: diminutive size and unobtrusive manner, high heels and exquisite grooming, soft voice and careful diction. She does not use vulgar language or even patois. She distinguishes herself from all men and common women through body language. A lady knows her place; when she goes out socially by night her husband escorts her; she avoids public transportation and must never walk.... A lady stands and sits with her legs together and when she dances she does not "wine." That is, she avoids the expansively/explicitly sexual hip movements of the dance style associated with ghetto women. For the middle and upper classes, the quintessential lady is still the queen of England. (151–152)

This follows that the dark-skinned Black women, especially those in dancehall, are stereotypically defined as classless "ghetto women" (151). These oppressive rules keep Black women firmly in place, based solely on Black skin. Natasha Barnes interviewed a dark-skinned Black woman in dancehall, Sheri Roth, who explained: "I know that they [skin bleaching crèmes] can do bad to your skin but I have nothing to lose in wanting to become a *brownin'*. I am poor and bored and being whiter would make me happier... I want people to think that I am more than a ghetto girl... I want to walk into dancehalls and feel like a movie star, a white one" (quoted in Barnes 103). Only in dancehall can Black women like Roth live a make-believe through masquerading to break the color lines in the society.

To be clear, Black people in dancehall are not trying to change their skin color to change their status. It is much more complex and cynical against the interconnectedness of skin color related to race, and related to gender and status. Black people are making sneering commentaries on age-old color distinctions through a masquerading in dancehall. In the past, Black and Brown peoples did not have a choice in John Canoe, and rebelled with disruptive and lewd songs and dances to the point of the 1841 ban of John Canoe (Wilmot 71). Now Black people in dancehall are critiquing skin color by changing their skin color to bleached-Brown skin to bring attention to the uptown/downtown barrier. Critics can debate as to whether a Black person should even have the right to alter their skin color, or to comment on the damage to the skin. However, what the Black people are actually commenting on is the color division that has existed for hundreds of years, and is still impacting the Black people who have always understood, and reacted against the systems of racism and colorism with sneering cynicism. In many ways the only way to protest skin color is in the epidermis of Black skin in dancehall.

By the end of the 1990s, the Ministry of Education in Jamaica launched its anti-skin bleaching campaign with a press conference warning the public about the dangers of skin bleaching creams, and banned harmful corticosteroids, the most harmful chemical in bleaching creams (Hope 715). Almost ten years later, the Ministry of Education continued with a "Don't Bleach the Skin" campaign in 2007, to educate the public about the medical effects of skin bleaching including skin cancers (Hope 2011, 715). Despite the public health education by the Ministry of Education, people have continued using skin whitening creams even more. In Maurice Tucker's documentary, *Inner City Bleachers: A Documentary* (2013), several Black people who lighten their dark skins reveal the special bleach creams and ointments they apply to lighten dark skin, including "Neprozone Gel," known as the "bad gel" because of how fast it works to lighten dark skin. Other creams and potions include "African Formula" and "Bio Oil" to quickly lighten the skin (Tucker, 2013). In dancehall culture, Black people who use skin bleaching creams to become "Brown" are called skin bleachers, and even *duppies* (a Creole word for "ghosts") who only come out at night to avoid the sunlight in the daytime. Skin bleachers have even reported that the over use of skin bleaching agents have led to open lesions and skin cancers at an alarming rate (Tucker 2013). No matter the medical consequences, skin bleachers in Tucker's documentary claim that "if you're Black [dark skinned], nobody will see you in the world," hence being Black renders you "invisible" (Tucker 2013). Another skin bleacher, Anita explains that "if you're black, life is harder for you in Jamaica," and that "life is easier for you, when you're brown" (Tucker 2013). Another skin bleacher, Claudette says that she lightens her skin for the "style and fashion;" Princess explains that Black women bleach their skins to look beautiful, and ultimately that you can apply for and get a job when you obtain Brown skin in Jamaica.

By the 2000s and 2010s, skin bleaching had become popular among Black men who wanted to achieve the bleached-Brown skin, associated with "femininity," and popularized by dancehall artiste, Vybz Kartel, a staunch advocate for skin bleaching as a body art and communication (Helber 116). Adijah Azim Palmer, professionally known as Vybz Kartel has been a chart-topping dancehall artiste, including the Billboard top

one hundred singles chart, from the 1990s to the present. Known as the "King of Dancehall" and the original "badman" glorifying violence and death, while challenging issues of race and colorism with skin bleaching over decades. His once rich dark skin, is now a washed-out bleached-Brown complexion, filled with tattoos (Helber 116). Due to his tumultuous lifestyle and violence, Kartel was arrested and charged for murder in 2011 and released, and then again in 2014 and is currently serving a life sentence. Nevertheless, Kartel has continued his music career and recording behind bars, maintaining an ever popular presence in dancehall (Helber 116).

Kartel reveals how his bleached-Brown skin is a "colouring book" for communicating personal stories, experiences, including tattoos about his children, and about the friends he has lost (Helber 116–117). Kartel uses his skin as a scroll for personal stories and woes, a literal palimpsest for earlier masquerades about race and colorism. Earlier British colonial constructs dictated that light skin denoted "femininity," and dark skin represented "masculinity." Several critics believed that Kartel was even trying to become "feminine," having attained a bleached-Brown skin, and that somehow he was now "gay" by stereotypically associating femininity with light skin. Again, these coded signs from British colonial racist and colorist systems had some people "reading" Kartel's body and skin as "feminine" and "gay," which was not necessarily the case. However, I would argue that Kartel was commenting on the colonial constructs and codes by breaking down the boundaries across skin color, race, and gender.

In addition to brown skin as spectacle for both Black men and women, John Canoe had included disruptive behaviors as mentioned earlier by some rebel Black and Brown people who did everything they could to disrupt the racial grotesquery in the orderliness of skin color "sets," enforced by British colonials in John Canoe. From crossdressing, *winin'* dances with pretend copulation, risqué lyrics about the sexual exploits of white men with Black and Brown women – some of which can be observed in dancehall acts today via Kartel, Spice, and others. Historical John Canoe masquerades of the eighteenth and nineteenth century included Black and Brown men groups in "sets" according to the gradation of skin color in the Kingston Regiment (Scott 216). White men marched in the front, next came Brown men, and then Black men marched in the back of the parade. In dancehall today, Black men, like Kartel, who appear as bleached-brown are playing as bleached-brown to unsettle the permanence of colorism, even as he challenges strict color codes associating brown skin with "femininity," gender, and sexuality. In many ways, Kartel has managed to make it "okay" for Black men to challenge colorism and racism on their bodies and skin in the most outlandish ways, and to explore homoeroticism and pretend sexual intercourse in dancehall that emerged in John Canoe as necessary disruptors of skin color "sets" and systems.

### Dancehall Lyrics: "Bleach On, Bleach On"

Dancehall songs have long caricatured brown skin, including outlandish and cynical declarations that promote skin bleaching, and "long straight" hair extensions. Captain Barkey's skin bleaching anthem "Bleach On, Bleach On," Vybz Kartel's "Cake Soap," Lisa Hyper's "Proud ah mi Bleaching" all blatantly encouraging skin bleaching (Hope 171–174; Charles 375); in part, as sarcasm and caricature of colorism, and societal attacks on some dark-skinned Black people for following the skin bleaching trend. Many dancehall artistes revered "natural brownings" in song, only to respond with songs venerating dark-skinned Black women when criticized for colorism. Songs to dark-skinned Black women contained the usual references to "natural beauty" and affinity with "Africa as motherland." For example, Richie Spice's 2007 rendition of the song "Brown Skin" (2007) describes his desire for a brown-skinned woman who will be forever commemorated "in my song, your name will be mentioned" (Richie Spice 2007).

*Hey Brown skin  
 Girl I wanna wrap you and lock you in my arms an ting  
 Hey Brown skin  
 Woman I love the vibes I love the spice I love the passion you bring ...  
 In my songs your name will be mentioned  
 I'll give you love an' affection  
 So glad that Jah made a woman  
 What a match perfect combination  
 Multiply and bring forth the nation  
 I love you baby everyday*

Richie Spice. "Brown Skin." *In the Streets to Africa*, lines 1–4 & 23–26, VP Records, 2007.

Richie Spice then follows a song "Black Woman" in 2011 as a "real woman," not the manufactured, artificial bleached-brown woman, but as Black woman crowned, the African "Queen of the motherland:"

*What a black woman, yus*  
*Girl, a wey yu deh so long*  
 (Girl, where have you been for so long)  
*A real woman, yeah*  
*Queen of the motherland*  
*Empress number one*  
*Girl, I wanna be your lover man, eeh*

Richie Spice. "Black Woman." *Book of Job*, lines 9–14, VP Records, 2011, parenthetical comments mine.

Earlier examples from Buju Banton's "Love me Browning" (Love my Browning) (1993) objectified "brownings" or "Brown Girls," synonymous with his car, bike, and money.

*Me love me car Me love me bike*  
 (I love my car I love my bike)  
*Me love me money and ting*  
 (I love my money and things)  
*But most of all, Me love me browning*  
 (But most of all, I love my browning)

Buju Banton. "Love Me Browning." *Mr. Mention*, lines 6–8, Penthouse Records, 1993, parenthetical comments mine.

After some public outcry over valorizing "brownings" over Black women in Jamaica, Banton soon followed with his release of the song "Black Woman" in 1993 celebrating dark-skinned Black women.

*Wi nuh stop cry fi all Black woman*  
 (We can't stop pining all Black women)  
*Big up all de girls dem wid dark complexion*  
 (High praise to all girls with dark complexion)  
*Cause wi nuh stop cry fi all black woman*  
 (Because we cannot help pining for all black women)  
*Nuff tings ah gwan fi uno complexion*  
 (A lot is happening for your complexion)

Buju Banton. "Black Woman." *Mr. Mention*, lines 8–11, Penthouse Records, 1993, parenthetical comments mine.

These dancehall songs show ongoing contestation over colorism in Jamaica since the skin masquerades in the Brown Girls Balls, Set Girls, and dancehall. Remember Scott's nineteenth century observation of Set Girls as Brown "lady" and black "woman," valuing the brown "sets" as performing femininity according to skin color (Scott 215).

Today, the act of rubbing the skin whitening creams on dark skin is a performative ritual in dancehall, and has already drawn attention to Jamaica's racial and color oppression, especially through the spectacle of performance and masquerading the skin as protest. Kartel, in another dancehall song, refers to the ritual of "rubbing on [his] bleaching cream" to get ready for the dancehall event, in Portmore, one of the many venues for dancehall in the 2010s, and thus establishing the bleaching cream as a necessary act in masquerading as bleached-brown.

*Mi a rub on mi bleaching cream, yeah*  
 (I am rubbing on my bleaching cream on my skin, yeah)  
*See me in a Portmore scheme, yeah*  
 (Look at me in Portmore housing complex, yeah)  
*Haffi have rum fi the team, yeah*  
 (I need to get rum for my team, yeah)

*Tell everybody seh a free fi come in, yeah*

(Tell everybody that it is free to enter, yeah)

Vybz Kartel. "Dancehall." *Viking (Vybz Is King)*, lines 27–30, TJ Records, 2014, parenthetical comments mine.

As an accessory and dressing ritual, skin bleaching creams are worn to become "brown" in dancehall—with free entrance for everyone who requires a politically symbolic and safe space for a masquerade from Black skin to bleached-brown for nowhere else, but in the dancehall. The act of becoming "brown" in dancehall as a show of upward mobility is to masquerade the violent effects of colorism and racism. Consequently, many Black Jamaicans claim a brown status in dancehall as part of the fantastical fun, and play in masquerade; yet, they remain critical and cynical of colorism and racism in and outside of dancehall.

## Spice's "Black Hypocrisy" and Bleached-Brown Skin Masquerade on Instagram

The recent furor over dancehall artiste Spice's promotion for her 2018 song and video "Black Hypocrisy," showing Spice on Instagram in a bleached-brown appearance as if she had lightened her once dark Black skin to bleached-brown (see **Figure 7**). She donned an iconic dancehall look, a bleached-brown skin with heavy white makeup to appear bleached-brown with a long blonde wig with the caption, "nothing wrong with a fresh start" (Spice 2018). Spice's bleached-brown appearance was reminiscent of the original Smith's signature "Dancehall Queen" fashion, but with her natural brown skin. Critics thought Spice had betrayed her "race" by bleaching her dark skin ("Rapper Spice Responds To 'Skin Bleaching' Backlash"). It turned out that Spice was only posing as a bleached-brown to get the usual reaction from critics who attack dark-skinned Black people for using skin whitening creams in dancehall. The usual criticism of dark-skinned people, included the "low self-esteem." After the onslaught of attacks against her and dark-skinned Black people in dancehall, Spice revealed that she was wearing costume and makeup to appear as if she had bleached her skin brown. Then she launched the single, "Black Hypocrisy" from her album *Capture Mixtape* that chastised critics' hypocrisy and denial of colorism. Spice wanted to provoke debate about the society's colorism, as she defended Blacks who choose to perform in bleached-brown skin in dancehall.

Over the course of the next few days, Spice posted more pictures of herself as a bleached-brown "brown-ing" on Instagram. In doing so, Spice proved how to masquerade skin color with makeup and wigs, and how these could be performed and caricatured in dancehall. In another post, she referred to herself in the third person as a persona and character, to make fun of the bleached-brown appearance, and Jamaica's historical value on brown skin. Spice wondered what she would call her bleached-brown character on Instagram, and encouraged her fans who were in on the joke to help her name this bleached-brown character (see **Figure 8**). Spice quipped, "I just realize (sic) that she needs a name. I've seen so many funny names. Help me name the brown spice" (Spice 2018). She then listed some possible names for her bleached-brown character with hashtags, flour, salt, "seasonsalt," rice, lasco,<sup>10</sup> and curry known for the white coloring, except for curry, seen as the "yellow" complexion (see **Figure 8**). Spice's showed that she could perform a skin masquerade as persona, a character, and an alter ego ahead of the release of her album and featured song, "Black Hypocrisy" to call out racism and colorism, as critics tried to shame her for masquerading as "brown." Spice's spectacle reveals exactly how Black Jamaicans in dancehall play as brown with cynicism and sarcasm in earnest against racism and colorism in present-day Jamaica.

After the photo shoot, Spice removed the bleached-brown makeup and costume to go back to her natural melanated dark-skin complexion on her album cover (see **Figure 9**). On the *Captured Mixtape* album cover featured Spice, a Black woman tied to a chair with ropes, mouth duct-taped, almost naked with only underwear. The image of Spice, represents a Black woman apprehended and silenced. Spice's complexion on the album cover appears darker, richer, and shinier. In this way, Spice shows how bleached-brown skin is a masquerade in "pretending" to be bleached brown in dancehall as an act – an act available to dark-skinned Black people in dancehall to protest the boundaries set in skin color and colorism on their own bodies and skin. I would further argue that Blacks who wear this bleached-brown appearance in dancehall do so to highlight colorism in society; and even further as caricatures. It is not about Black people actually wanting to become Brown as others have suggested. It is about becoming Brown in a masquerade, a play, an act. It is

<sup>10</sup> "Seasonsalt" is a cooking seasoning; and Lasco is a brand of powdered milk or "milk powder" in Jamaica and the Caribbean.

about pretending to be Brown, like a caricature and spectacle. By masquerading as Brown, the performance is agency itself in the ability to comment and criticize colorism on the skin itself; and not merely as an "internalized racism" or "low self-esteem" as many would suggest, without considering the full scope of satirical playfulness in masquerading.



**Figure 7:** Promotional photo of Spice in dress for album from: Spice. *Instagram*, 22 Oct. 2018. Spice's Instagram photo in heavy makeup, pretending to have bleached her skin permanently from dark skin to bleached-brown. She wears a waist-length blonde wigs, and blue contact lenses. Spice posts "Nothing wrong with a fresh start. My mix tape is ready for pre-order today on all platforms. Preorder yours and tag me #Captured."



**Figure 8:** Photo of Spice from: Spice. *Instagram*, 24 Oct. 2018. Spice posts "I just realize that she needs a name. I've seen so many funny names. Help me name the brown spice. #Flour #Salt #Seasonsalt #rice #lasco #curry ????" She suggests naming this masquerade persona.



**Figure 9:** Spice Album cover from: Spice. *Instagram*, 22 Oct. 2018. Spice showing the contrast to the “browning” photo to her rich dark-skin for the album cover for “Captured Mixtape” (2018) featuring the song, “Black Hypocrisy,” after the promotional photo on Instagram in a bleached-brown masquerade.

In the song, “Black Hypocrisy,” Spice defends dark-skinned Black women in dancehall who lighten their skins, while condemning Jamaica’s society for racism and colorism. Spice states:

Chorus:

*Black people hypocrisy*  
*Leave di girls dem with low self-esteem*  
 (Leave the girls with low self-esteem)  
*Unu gwaan like seh you haffi brown fi pretty*  
 (You're going on as if you have to be brown to be pretty)  
*Fuck di whole a dem, dirty inequity.*  
 (Fuck all of them, dirty inequity)

Verse:

*Dem she mi black til mi shine, til mi look dirty*  
 (They say that I'm black until I'm shine, until I look dirty)  
*And it's the only line in life that will ever hurt me*  
*Because it never come from a Caucasian, trust mi*  
 (Because it wasn't coming from a Caucasian, trust me)  
*Dis a black colorism big hypocrisy*  
 (This black colorism is a big hypocrisy)  
*So if I wake up tomorrow look like a browning, oh!*  
 (So, if I wake up tomorrow looking like a browning, oh!)

*Automatically mi would a carry di swing*  
 (Automatically, I would be all the rage)  
*Nuff a unnuh nah go like di song yah mi sing*  
 (Many of you will not like this song that I'm singing [to you])  
*Because nuff a unnuh guilty fi di same damn thing*  
 (Because many of you are guilty of the same damn thing)  
*What's your perception of a pretty woman (tell me)*  
*Is it straight nose with her hair well long? (tell me)*  
*Black girls lose self-confidence*  
 (Black girls have lost their self-confidence)  
*Cause they attach the word "ugly" to our complexion*  
 Spice. "Black Hypocrisy." *Captured Mixtape*, lines 22–29 & 30–41, Scorn Dem Productions, 2018, parenthetical comments mine.

Spice defends the Black women who use skin bleaching creams to change their complexion from dark-skin to light-skin in her song, "Black Hypocrisy:" "... *Leave di girls dem with low self-esteem* (Leave the girls with low self-esteem)/*Unu gwaan like seh you haffi brown fi pretty* (You're going on as if you have to be brown to be pretty)." In this way, Spice shifts the typical criticism from the dark-skinned women to protesting racism and colorism in Jamaica's society.



**Figure 10:** Photo of Spice from: Spice. *Instagram*, 23 Oct. 2018. Spice's photo on Instagram in a skin color masquerade to promote her album, *Captured Mixtape*, with the single and video for chart topping song, "Black Hypocrisy." Spice posts, "I'm feeling so excited in my dress from @fashionnovacurve because my song #Blackhypocrisy is #1 on the Reggae iTunes Chart in the USA and in the UK. By the way the official Video is Out now #blackhypocrisychallenge #Freshstart CLICK THE LINK IN MY BIO AND PRE ORDER #Captured."

Beyond Jamaica's woes of colorism and racism, and dancehall's paradoxical response with a bleached-brown skin, masquerade remains reminiscent of past skin color masquerades. Spice has taken the issue of colorism internationally with song, "Black Hypocrisy" and with a skin color masquerade on Instagram. In **Figure 10**, Spice wears a maxi floral dress with long sleeves complete with skin whitening makeup and waist-length blonde hair. The image is set for tea with white tea pot and cups on a small table. Spice sits against a green-grass backdrop with white flowers, an image of whiteness and in being "lady-like." This is in direct contrast with the typical dancehall image and fashion of skimpy clothing and eroticism, illustrating the point of skin color as masquerade to bring attention to the permanence in skin color and its boundaries that should never be crossed with Black people, according to the rules of colorism and Set Girls that "no blackie ever interloped with the browns, nor did the browns in any case mix with the sables – always keeping in mind – black *woman* – brown lady" (Scott 214–215).

## Conclusion

To dismiss or accuse some Black people as having "low esteem," or "internalized racism" for masquerading as bleached-brown is far too narrow an analysis that stops short of nuances that appear when explored through the lens of performance. In fact, some criticisms of dancehall sound too close to the nineteenth century criticism of John Canoe as "debased and vulgar" (Senior 85). Skin bleaching for a bleached-brown appearance in dancehall reveals an earlier palimpsest masquerade when enslaved and freed Black people were subjected to British-sponsored skin color parades such as Brown Girls Balls, Set Girls Parades, and John Canoe that valued brown skin. Even when the British colonial authorities instituted and coerced Black and Brown people to parade in sets of skin color, Black people had always protested racial grotesquery with disorder, chaos, and eroticism as satire, including sexually risqué songs that challenged color lines and sexual exploitation in historical masquerades. Dancehall today emerged from these earlier skin color masquerades. In fact, as Black people peel away the layers and scratch of the delicate surfaces of dancehall, what peeks through are earlier masquerades about skin color.

My focus here has been on the oppression of colorism and racism in Jamaica's colonial past, and not on Black people for the cause and effect of their social conditions, because to do so, would fit neatly into racist narratives that revictimize Black people for their own "demise." Black people have, for hundreds of years, always resisted racial oppression with biting satires, caricatures, cunning, and extreme unorthodoxy as in the case of skin bleaching for a bleached appearance. It is as if the "balls at Kingston to *'Brown Girls'*" and Set Girls parades have returned in a renewed and recontextualized masquerade of brown skin; and a curious pattern emerges for skin color yet again with dancehall's bleached-brown skins to comment on the skin color delineated as "uptown" (light-skin Brown and white people) and "downtown" (dark-skinned Black people). This time in its current iteration, Smith's entrance in dancehall in the 1990s with her signature "browning" Dancehall Queen image, hits its third decades of dancehall fashion, reigniting and reimagining brown skin again in masquerades. She shows just how brown skin masquerades never really went away since the Brown Girls Balls and Set Girls parades, and how easily it resurfaced in palimpsest to recontextualize brown skin as spectacle in a new way from the late twentieth century to the present.

Not enough credit has been given to Smith for this "sub-genre" of bleached-brown skins in dancehall since the 1990s, although many critics have blamed her over the years for the widespread skin-bleaching craze and new health risks (Hope 715). As a sort of penance, Smith had joined anti-skin bleaching campaigns in the 2010s to warn those susceptible to skin lesions and concerns (Hope 715). However, masquerades of brown skin color in Jamaica's history occurred long before Smith's entrance in dancehall with her natural brown skin as Dancehall Queen as mentioned earlier. I would reiterate that the effects of racism and colorism have done the damage to Black skin, rather than the skin-bleaching creams of the world. Through the lens of performance and Jamaica's performance history, skin masquerades are indicative of how Black people have always found ways to perform against race and gender codes with brown and black signifiers.

More importantly, many Black people have been speaking out of the silence about Black skin and colorism in its many iterations throughout the centuries as palimpsests uncovering layers of earlier skin color masquerades such as Brown Girls Balls, Set Girls parades, John Canoe, and dancehall. Becoming bleached-brown in dancehall may seem like a paradox in denouncing racism and colorism, but this paradox is precisely the nature of masquerade as a satirical and cynical act. How will this paradox of skin bleaching in dancehall impact future masquerades that address racism and colorism? Historically, colorism has left such an indelible mark and permanence, so much so that Black people in dancehall have reacted with a permanence of their own by becoming bleached-brown anyway. Skin bleaching for the coveted bleached-brown complexion

in dancehall is yet another skin color masquerade in Jamaica's history, but one that critiques colorism and racism anew in contemporary Jamaican life. Understanding how skin color works in palimpsests, where earlier masquerades still show through under multiple layers of history, will open new analyses on the bleached-brown skins in dancehall so as to shift the not so tenuous nature of colorism, race, gender, and identity in Jamaica's masquerade history.

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The author has no competing interests to declare.

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