

Uptown-Downtown Kingston: The Embodiment of Class in Jamaican Dancehall

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The Uptown (upper-class) and Downtown (lower-class) divide is reified in Jamaica in a myriad of ways. Class inequalities, shaped by colonial legacies, pervade myriad aspects of Jamaica's political and cultural life. Dancehall is a crucial way through which these colonial inequalities can be understood due to the tensions, divisions and inherent contradictions present within the contemporary dancehall space. Dancehall, known for its inherent lewdness, is at the center of Kingston's urban sociocultural life. However, the appeal of dancehall and its romantic, exoticized and commodified nature fails to exist in the very spaces from which it originates – Kingston's inner city. In Uptown Jamaica, dancehall has taken on a different form, emerging as a stylized element of embodying "the other." Though inherently characterized by 'downtownness,' dancehall spaces are capitalized upon and made trendy or sexy by Uptown Jamaica while its Downtown version remains demeaned and criminalized. Dancehall events themselves operate on this spectrum and thus, they emerge political spaces where class identities and socioeconomic anxieties are navigated.

The overarching aim of my project was to understand how the characterization of dancehall spaces act as a means through which Jamaica's class dynamics are reproduced and perpetuated. With this, I aimed to understand how class divisions inherited from colonial legacies are reified through Uptown-Downtown contentions within dancehall. Through participant/observation at dancehall events, as well as semi-structured interviews, I looked at how dancehall is performed and embodied in both Uptown and Downtown spaces. My project focused particularly on how the Uptown versus Downtown embodiment of dancehall is conceptualized – including its overlapping elements and points of contention. I aimed also to understand the realm of the individual – documenting and analyzing how individual stories take shape surrounding Kingston's inherent Uptown-Downtown divide using the lens of dancehall. With this, I hope to craft a deeper understanding of class dynamics in Kingston and contribute to a larger conversation on how individual narratives create and shape the story of a city. In the collection of stories often left untold, I will capture the nuances of how the class divide is not only reified with tales of dancehall, but also how it intersects with history, politics, and colonialism.

I found that in both Uptown and Downtown spaces there were high levels of performativity involved with the ways in which dancehall was viewed and treated. However, the performances themselves were vastly different in terms of fashion, bodily movement, and energy. In the Downtown scene bold, risqué clothing and high levels of energy were seen as emblematic of a true dancehall experience and were the very elements that in Uptown spaces were dubbed as representative of the lower-class. In Uptown spaces, fashion choices were significantly less flashy and energies more subdued. Interestingly, in the interviews conducted Uptowners incessantly perpetuated that the connection between dancehall and class is not as significant as it once was, insisting that dancehall is more of a unifying force than anything else. Downtowners did not feel this way. Though they are open to the upper-class embracing the dancehall culture and lifestyle, they held the sentiment that significant divisions within dancehall remains. Furthermore, the soul and meaning of dancehall continue to be annexed to Jamaica's Downtown, while the Uptown embrace acts as more of a trendy aestheticization of an alternate lived reality. Class inequalities persist and are forged in a variety of ways, and the dichotomization of socioeconomic identities in the dancehall space remains. Hence, the dancehall scene continues to be riddled by diverging identities and contradictions in how it is treated and performed in both Uptown and Downtown spaces.