

'Reggae tourism' hurts Jamaican identity

Reggae has evolved from a gritty, rhythmic invocation against social and political injustice to a pleasant, sappy background music accompanying commercials, according to Carolyn Cooper, a professor at the University of the West Indies in Jamaica. Cooper, who delivered a lecture in the Haldeman Center on Friday, said that despite reggae's many changes in form and style, in pure form it remains the heart and soul of Jamaica and its people. Reggae will also be forever marred by advertisements promoting heritage tourism in Jamaica that distort the true beat behind a music some have now labeled as belonging only in elevators, Cooper said. Cooper acknowledged that heritage tourism, for all its flaws, is an indispensable part of the Jamaican economy — reggae has the power to fill Jamaica's empty hotels and support its local businesses with capital from visitors from all over the world, Cooper said. Cooper also emphasized the major pitfall of 'reggae tourism': The promotion of Jamaica as a tourist hotspot, the natives as exotic locals and reggae as mainstream pop only further connects the Jamaican population with an economic scheme that cannot serve as a permanent solution. 'Americans go on vacation to escape the mundane banalities of their lives,' she said. 'Most Jamaicans can't afford to do that. They envy your ability to escape your boredom and turn theirs into your pleasure.' The issue, according to Cooper, isn't that tourism is wrong, but that advertising agencies are promoting Jamaica in such a way that it is challenging the nation's identity. It sometimes seems as if it is more about the tourists than the people, Cooper said, as natives often cannot even obtain seats to popular reggae festivals. Cooper illustrated the tension between the 'real' Jamaica and the Jamaica featured on glossy brochures with the example of Damian 'Junior Gong' Marley's 'Welcome to Jamrock.' The grim, ominous track, Cooper said, 'militantly contests the Jamaica Tourist Board's appropriation of [Bob Marley's] disquieting 'One Love' as an unambiguous anthem of social harmony: 'Come to Jamaica and feel alright.' Damian Marley is Bob Marley's son. Cooper said that the tourist board, in promoting Jamaica as a place of peace and harmony, naturally does not want the world to hear the gritty underbelly of reggae. For example, Bob Marley's original lyrics for 'One Love' were quite dark. 'Is there a place for the hopeless sinner/Who has hurt all mankind just to save his own?' he wrote. Bob Marley's lyrics, Cooper said, represent an attempt to find true peace and harmony in Jamaica while acknowledging that the nation is marked by economic instability, high crime rates and other social blights. Reggae in its raw, unaltered form unflinchingly deals with subjects ranging from religion to love, sexuality and poverty, according to Cooper. 'It is a rhythmic resistance against the system of exploitation of people,' Cooper said. The challenge, Cooper pointed out, is to tap into Jamaica's tourist income without dehumanizing the people and marginalizing the culture. Cooper suggested, however, that not all is glum: For all the waves of tourism and commercialization, Cooper said, reggae remains intrinsically Jamaican and continues to serve not only as a source of a pride, but as an outlet for the local Jamaicans. Cooper remarked that just as jazz and rock-and-roll, while still influential, are no longer regarded as the 'popular' music of our era, reggae too will become 'old people's music' one day. But for now, it remains the authentic manifestation of Jamaica's culture, a resounding affirmation of the Jamaican people's creativity and inspiration.