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FEMALE AGENCY AND OPPRESSION IN CARIBBEAN BACCHANALIAN CULTURE: SOCA, CARNIVAL, AND DANCEHALL

KEVIN FRANK

What is at issue, briefly, is the over-all “discursive fact,” the way in which sex is “put into discourse.”

—Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, volume 1, *An Introduction*

In this essay I examine the politics of Caribbean women’s agency and oppression through sexual performance in settings of song, dance, and general revelry—that is, bacchanalian. Soca, carnival, and dancehall sites are replete with nihilistic scenes of unabashed thrill-seeking, risk-taking sexual displays and competing gender politics.¹ One does not need to look too hard into the minutiae of Caribbean social practices to find emergent there the sort of compensatory politics of Black performance identified by Paul Gilroy: “An amplified and exaggerated masculinity has become the boastful centerpiece of a culture of compensation that self-consciously salves the misery of the disempowered and subordinated. This masculinity and its relational feminine counterpart become special symbols of the difference that race makes” (1993, 85). Our focus here is less on what Gilroy correctly identifies as the nationalist bent of cultural criticism and more on the articulations of the subordinated within Black Atlantic culture. Caribbean revels are rife with these exhibitionistic expressions. In dancehall particularly, dancehall girls or “queens” are the “relational feminine counterpart” referred to by Gilroy. The excessive hypersexuality in dancehall represents the performance of a particular racial identity that repudiates the colonial heritage, for instance, the “moral excellence and character training” that was part of the enabling discourse of Victorians such as Thomas Arnold and continues to be part of the discourse of well-meaning Caribbeans of a certain class, or with certain class aspirations. Dramatic and ritualistic, dancehall performances are also burlesque-carnavalesque practices.

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Somewhat grotesque in exaggeration, among other things, these exhibitions caricature dominant culture, for example, its ideals of beauty and good taste.

My interest in this topic stems primarily from thought-provoking work produced by scholars such as Carolyn Cooper and Belinda Edmondson. For the most part, this work presents an overly optimistic view of the potential for female liberation. For example, in *Sound Clash*, Cooper asserts that in dancehall the “affirmation of the pleasures of the body, which is often misunderstood as a devaluation of female sexuality, also can be theorized as an act of self-conscious female assertion of control over the representation of her person” (2004b, 125–26). Edmondson’s essay “Public Spectacles” possesses a similarly favorable outlook regarding the power of female performance:

My main argument centers around the different meanings accorded to different kinds of female public “performances,” a term I use to describe women’s popular culture rituals and behaviors in the public sphere. In that “performance” suggests a physical gesture made with a physical body for a passive viewing audience, it is a particularly apt term for my purposes here. “Performance” implies agency, an act meant to do particular kinds of work or make particular kinds of statements. (Edmondson 2003, 2)

The incessant fetishization of women in dancehall and other performance spaces necessitates a reexamination of such optimism. Are these female sexual performances potentially liberating? Equally important, is there a meaningful difference between that potential and actuality?

I contend that, indeed, there is a difference. In exhibiting themselves sexually, Caribbean women are not the agents of meaning: they merely perform self-control. The necessity of that performance is itself an indication of a lack of control. Three of Judith Bettelheim’s categories of female performance—costumed public dancing, gender-based self-performance, and performing royalty (1998, 68)—merge in our analysis, which is especially concerned with the issue of agency. As Bettelheim notes when interpreting a female carnival dancer, “Given the cultural conditions which not only repress woman’s sexuality but also prohibit her from being sexual, because being sexual is always defined

in terms of the patriarchy, this female performer uses her sexuality as an active agent” (69). Borrowing from Jeanie Forte, she adds that sexy or sexual performers “expose their bodies in order to reclaim them, to assert their own pleasure and sexuality, thus denying the fetishistic pursuit [by men]” (69). Viewed from a psychological perspective, however, Caribbean women’s heightened sexual displays suggest other than reclamation of the fetishized body and rebellion against authority and puritanical mores: they suggest infantile sexual lives, prone to the manipulation of authority. Furthermore, the inflexible position of male power associated with Caribbean female sexual performances renders such acts exploitative, almost pornographic. That is, they are akin to sex in advertising, which, according to Jean Kilbourne, is pornographic in that the women are by and large objectified and dehumanized (1998, 445).

A major key in our study is the politics of control. In fact, it is the critical factor Bettelheim points to in making the case for seeing Josephine Baker as a prototype of the self-asserting female sexual performer: “I believe she [Baker] was firmly in control, using her sexuality as an oppositional practice. In many female performance roles—the bad girl, the rebellious diva, and the sexy entertainer—the woman is the agent, not the carrier, of meaning. She is a producer of meanings; she is an active masquerader, in control of self” (Bettelheim 1998, 69). The masquerade is also important in Cooper’s reading of women in dancehall. In an interview in the journal *Proudflesh* she explains: “I look at what I call erotic disguise in the films *Dancehall Queen* and *Babymother*—one set in Jamaica, the other in the UK—and examine the ways in which marginalised working class women reclaim their sensuality in the masquerade of the Dancehall” (*Proudflesh*, 2004). My own argument hinges on the mask of such masquerades: I am particularly interested in what really lies beneath the mask. According to Roberta Clarke, “The pervasiveness and societal acceptance of violence against women has been traced by feminist scholars to the structures of sexual and economic inequality in society” (1998, 10). Those structures of inequality continue to support the gender status quo, with men ultimately in power.

TEMPTED TO TOUCH: RITUAL “SONG AND DANCE” OF THE FEMALE BODY IN SOCA

*To all the ladies in the dance
I lose all control when I see you
Standing there in front of me
Your style, your clothes, your hair
You fair woman, you look so sexy
The way you wine and, the way you dance
And the way that you twist and turn your waist
Leaves me wanting, leaves me yearning
Leaves me feeling for a taste*
—Rupee, “Tempted to Touch”

*Pon bed pon floor against wall
We sex dem all till dem call mi
I’m di girls dem sugar dats all
Welcome di king of di dancehall.*
—Beenie Man, “King of the Dancehall”

It has been some thirty years since world-renowned calypsonian the Mighty Sparrow (Slinger Francisco) titillated Caribbean women with foreplaying promise in his brilliant satire of Caribbean men for their disavowing attitude toward the exploration of a certain liberating aspect of female sexuality, cunnilingus: “It’s sweeter than meat / When you want to eat / All saltfish sweet,” goes the refrain of his perennial hit “Saltfish” (The Mighty Sparrow 1976). However, after all this time, there seems as much if not a greater distance between Sparrow’s encouraging posture and the generally excoriating attitude toward cunnilingus exhibited in dancehall. Even with the well-orchestrated rise of Sean Paul, as the braggart title of the epigrammatic song above suggests, Beenie Man continues to set the trend and remains in strong contention as King of Dancehall; his lyric from the same song, “Mi stand up and d’weet nuh bow dung and taste” (Beenie Man 2005) is indicative of the male position widely reflected in dancehall specifically, and in the Caribbean generally. That is, the song’s speaker declares he has sex standing up (with his penis erect), not with his tongue. The following line from Mad Cobra’s “Put Gunshot” is an even better example of this hostile attitude: “Boy weh tek bumpa and taste below waist / Put gunshot in a yuh blood clot face” (Mad Cobra

2005). Granted, here, “Boy weh tek bumpa” (boys who take it from behind) refers to homosexuals, while “Boy weh taste below waist” refers to those who go down on women. The first group is not to be overlooked, especially given the rampant homophobia and threat of violence expressed in dancehall lyrics. But our primary concern here is the equation of the second group with the first and the unequivocal pejorative, violent attitude toward both.

What is the impact of the preponderance of such messages on Caribbean women’s sexuality? What are the figurative and literal implications for Caribbean women’s bodies? Again, Cooper theorizes that, through a sort of carnivalesque signification, dancehall culture is one of the rare spaces where Caribbean women may have the potential for sexual agency. In “Dancehall Dress: Competing Codes of Decency in Jamaica,” she posits that:

[Dancehall] codes are often misunderstood as signs of the devaluation of female sexuality. But this sense of style can also be seen as empowering. Woman as sexual being claims the right to sexual pleasure as an essential marker of her identity. Both fleshy women and their more sinewy sisters are equally entitled to display themselves in the public sphere as queens of revelry. Exhibitionism conceals ordinary imperfections. 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. (Cooper 2004a, 77)

One troubling aspect of this view is the apparent acceptance of the atavistic projection of sexual essentialism upon Africans, a significant feature of colonialism’s subjugating ideological discourse. But the exhibitionism referred to conceals something else. The dominant message emanating from the music and performances of dancehall spaces paradoxically contests the potential of female sexual power and attempts to reassert a macho, paternalistic, disciplining, oppressive attitude toward women and women’s sexuality. The substance of that attitude ultimately overrides whatever potential exists in the style and stylized exhibitions of female sexuality inside and outside dancehalls.

Without a doubt, one of the hottest soca hits of the past few years

that continues to move Caribbean and other people on dance floors around the world is Kevin Lyttle's "Turn Me On." Recorded on Lyttle's native island of Saint Vincent, the song's success is a result in part of its creole or hybrid nature: it mixes traditional soca with American Rhythm and Blues (R & B) and, equally important, dancehall. I choose this song precisely because it was and continues to be so popular, which increases the possibility that its coded message, arguably more dangerous because subtle, will become salient. That message may be readily missed, because it is easy to get caught up in the song's irresistible beat and sugary melody, but it sustains long-ingrained Caribbean notions of male-female sexuality, specifically, female exhibition and subordination to the male will. Consistent with a common theme of soca songs, the first verse celebrates performative, simulated sex in the dancehall:

For the longest while we jamming in the Party
 And you're wining on me
 Pushing everything
 Right back on top of me (Yea - hey)
 But if you think you're gonna get away from me
 You better change your mind
 You're going home . . .
 You're going home with me tonight. (Lyttle 2004)

For the uninitiated, wining is a form of dance that involves circular and thrusting motions of the hips and connected sexual body parts. On the one hand, the speaker's declaration, "You're going home with me tonight," can be taken as mere desire on his part. On the other hand, its syntax suggests a commanding posture: that is, if the woman wining on him feels empowered to "perform" sexually without the virtual act leading to sexual actualization (getting away from him), that power is immediately challenged by his declaration that she is going home with him. We can, I am sure, imagine what they would be doing once they get there.

In the song's chorus the speaker's instructions/declarations seem innocent enough; but, even so, they confirm the performativity of the woman's role and her objectification in the unfolding scenario. Having more in common with the posture of American R & B, these lyrics combine love and lust, inciting sensual/sexual excitement:

So let me hold you
 Girl caress my body
 You got me going crazy . . . you
 Turn me on, Turn me on.
 Let me jam you
 Girl wine all around me
 You got me going crazy . . . you
 Turn me on, Turn me on. (Lyttle 2004)

In wining all around him, the woman is clearly performing for him and is, therefore, the object of his gaze and desire. In other words, while the woman in this scenario may performatively assert her own pleasure and sexuality, that act does not deny the man's erotic fixation on and objectification of her. In the second verse there is an indication that the type of wining she is doing has something in common with dancehall's sexually explicit dance styles: "One hand on the ground and bumper [buttocks] cock sky high, wining hard on me" (Lyttle 2004). The potential for violence resulting from that performance and the male's libidinous gaze upon it is consistent with expected male-female sexual roles, wherein it is anticipated that the woman will satisfy the man's urges. According to Roberta Clarke, "Jordan, in her study on violence against women in Barbados, argues that this form of violence finds its origins in the sexist myth that women exist to satisfy the desires of men" (1998, 10-11).

It is when "Turn Me On" turns most clearly to dancehall for some ingredients to add to its mixed recipe that the macho, violent attitude is most obviously expressed. The successful trend in R & B of adding a splash of grittiness or street credibility to an otherwise overly pop song or artist by including a bridge done by a rapper apparently did not escape the song's producer. Madzart is brought in for this purpose and, rapping in a fashion similar to a dancehall DJ, he declares:

The girl ya nah go get way tonight
 If she think mad man nah go fight
 Me done feed she with popcorn and Sprite
 Now she want come fly way like kite. (Lyttle 2004)

Basically, he says, "I have spent money on this girl in buying her popcorn and Sprite soda and she wants to leave without doing me a sexual

favor in return. But she is not going to get away with that, at least, not without a fight.” The expected return favor is to satisfy his lust raised through her dancing/simulated sexual gyrations. Consistent with Jordan’s finding above, the group Change, founded and funded to research and publish reports on the condition and status of women all over the world, reports that for Jamaican children, “the values being taught in the home, school and churches concerning the body and human sexuality, are undermined and eroded at the same time by the content of mass media advertising messages which portray women as objects for the sexual pleasure and gratification of men” (Change 1982, 10–11). It is safe to assume that this problem exists elsewhere in the Caribbean. “Mad man” is an effective pun, referring reflexively and pronominally to the speaker/DJ himself, Madzart, and, as an adjective, to the speaker’s anger at the woman for thinking she could tease him sexually without consummating what was started on the dance floor. Given his indignation, the “fight” could mean he is going to make more of a determined effort to get her to go home with him, or it could mean he will attempt to overcome her sexually with blows, a practice still found socially acceptable in many Caribbean quarters. According to Sigmund Freud, “The sexuality of most male human beings contains an element of *aggressiveness*—a desire to subjugate; the biological significance of it seems to lie in the need for overcoming the resistance of the sexual object by means other than the process of wooing” (1962, 23–24). Obviously, male violence against women is not unique to the Caribbean. But, also obviously, in the scenario suggested by the song’s lyrics, the sexually exhibitionistic woman is eroticized and objectified. Thus, she is not really in control and she cannot be the agent of her impending sexual subjugation. To suggest otherwise is to return us in some ways to the confounding notion that a woman contributes to being raped by dressing revealingly.

“‘PRINCESS OR A SLAVE GIRL?’”: THE GUISE OF A CARNIVAL DISGUISE

Caribbean societies, apart from being cleaved by class and race divisions, are organised around hierarchical gender power relations with male domination reducing women to economic and emotional dependency.

—Roberta Clarke, *Violence Against Women in the Caribbean: State and Non-State Responses*

The paternalistic, macho attitude toward women's sexuality that contests female agency through sexual exhibition is also witnessed in Earl Lovelace's *The Dragon Can't Dance* (1998). Set in and around Port of Spain, Trinidad, between 1959 and 1971, this novel portrays, among other things, stylized displays of female sexuality, mainly during carnival season, with requisite carnivalesque practices in tow. Carnival is a significant site of Caribbean revelry, allowing for exhibitions of various roles, gender and otherwise. Carnival offers the opportunity to make believe, to contest old roles, and to assume new identities. But, regarding its subversive potential, the masquerade or carnival act requires careful critical scrutiny. Ella Shohat and Robert Stam's insight regarding the ambiguities of carnival is quite useful:

Historically, carnivals have been politically ambiguous affairs, sometimes constituting symbolic rebellions by the disenfranchised; at other times fostering the festive scapegoating of the weak by the strong (or by the slightly less weak). Carnivals, and carnivalesque artistic practices, are not *essentially* progressive or regressive; it depends on who is carnivalizing whom, in what historical situation, for what purposes, and in what manner. (Shohat and Stam 1994, 304, emphasis in the original)

In *The Dragon Can't Dance*, Miss Cleothilda (Cleo), the "queen," and Sylvia, the "princess," both make use of their sexuality to attain ends. However, both women are actually among the exploited.

The sexual power Miss Cleo and Sylvia possess is make-believe power, a masquerade. First, along with abusing her mulattohood to carnivalize her neighbors, Miss Cleo deploys what remains of her sexuality. The narrator describes her habit of "strutting about the yard with her rouged cheeks and padded hips, husbanding her fading beauty, flaunting her gold bangles and twin gold rings that proclaim that she was once married, wearing dresses, showing her knees, that if you give her a chance will show her thighs" (Lovelace 1998, 17). The rouged cheeks, padded hips, gold accessories, and revealing dress are all part of her costume arsenal, which seems to prefigure the more elaborate and provocative dancehall costumes. According to Norman Stolzoff:

The celebration of fashion and the erotic display of the female body became important to the dancehall event. The body was now a site of increasing degrees of adornment. These “donnettes” demonstrated their physical and financial “ass-ets” by wearing clothes labeled “batty riders,” which Chester Francis-Jackson defines as “a skirt or pair of shorts which expose more of the buttocks than it conceals.” . . . “Puny printers” (pants that showed the outlines of a woman’s genitalia), wigs of all colors, mesh tops, large jewelry (gold bangles, rings, earrings, nose rings), and elaborate hairdos all became part of the new fashion ensemble. (Stolzoff 2000, 110)

Miss Cleo’s “costuming” is a way of projecting her “queenship” (Lovelace 1998, 17), or power over others. But that claim to power is itself dependent upon a gender-based, hierarchical valuation and validation: the need to be seen as having been married.

Because Miss Cleo’s claim to power is partly determined by patriarchy, it is a projection of authority that merely serves to maintain the gender status quo, with men in control. That control is made clear in Miss Cleo’s relationship with Philo, a relationship in which Miss Cleo appears to be in charge, at least at first:

All year long she carried on hostile, superior and unaccommodating, refusing still from the height of her presumed gentility to give even recognition far less encouragement to Philo, the calypsonian across the street, who by whatever miracle of endurance and shamelessness and hope, after seventeen years still nursed this passion for her, dismissing him with that brisk turn of her head, the raising of her eyelashes and the sucking of her teeth, in one fluid gesture of disgust that she could perform better than anybody else. (Lovelace 1998, 18)

The important point here is that Miss Cleo is performing superiority over Philo; the goal of that performance is the projection of power, which makes it a carnivalesque act. In the main scene pertaining to this work’s title, some disenfranchised men “show-off power” in an effort to “threaten power” (186). But their charade is not a demonstration of actual power, a fact applicable to Miss Cleo. Philo is, as of yet, an

unsuccessful musician, and all that is required for Miss Cleo to succumb to his fetishistic objective is for him to begin to attain the trappings of patriarchal power, for him to be successful. Immediately after Philo's initial breakthrough as a calypsonian, their relationship changes, with "Miss Cleo gradually softening her parries to Philo's thrusts, until soon, although it wasn't Carnival, Philo had begun to ascend Miss Cleothilda's steps and sit down on her verandah and play with her dog" (136). The ultimate sign of Miss Cleo being controlled by Philo is her willing acceptance of his philandering and her related position as just one of his many lovers. Leaving one of his young lovers, Jo Ann, one night, Philo eventually ends up much later at Miss Cleo's: "A drowsy delight was in her voice, and she held out her two hands and drew him inside" (239).

In *The Dragon Can't Dance*, the heir to Miss Cleo's "queendom" is Sylvia, who, like Miss Cleo, appears to have power through her sexuality. The narrator describes how the community's older women view her: "In their hearts, they cheered her on, singing hurrahs at her speed and dangerousness and laughing, watching with joyful breathlessness how she tied up the tongues of young men with a movement of her head and caused old men to sigh for their youth as they watched her sitting cross-legged on the steps before the rooms in which she lived" (Lovelace 1979, 26). But the power apparent in the tying of young men's tongues and old men sighing for their youth is artificial. In reality, Sylvia's life is overdetermined by male desire. Her desire to assert herself through sexual exhibitionism during carnival neither allows her to reclaim her own body nor discourages the men's erotic preoccupation with her. That sexual interest is displayed from the outset:

Sylvia is dizzy with thoughts of Carnival. They are bursting in her brain. Everywhere she turns the young men of the area, who have grown up with her, turn and ask her: "Sylvia, you playing in the band?" Their eyes sweeping up her ankles, along the softening curves of her thighs and breasts, desiring her, wishing, each one of them, to have her jumping up with him in the band for Carnival, when, with the help of rum and the rhythm of abandon and surrender that conquered everyone he would find his way into her flesh. (24)

Sylvia is also the fetishized object of the much older Mr. Guy, whose power in being the rent collector leads her own mother, Miss Olive, to participate in her exploitation:

Once Mr Guy had felt her breasts, cupping them in his hands in that sly cunning hug, pretending fatherly affection; and one day she had crept upstairs to his room while he waited for her behind his curtains, his moustaches trembling and his radio on, and she had given him the message; her mother didn't have the money for the rent. Afterwards, she had lifted her downcast eyes to his as she felt his thick fingers slide up and down her thigh in that gesture of aggression and taming, as his chest rose and his nostrils flared; and she smiled, laughed in that same knowing innocence, that feigned play in which he couched his advances to her, and slipped away. (25)

Here, "feigned play" is a sign of Sylvia's performative participation in her own exploitation; Mr. Guy is author/authority of the play.

Miss Olive's exploitation of her daughter is a consequence of the hegemonic codes of conduct resulting from the patriarchal system implanted in the Caribbean since slavery times. Donna Hope notes fittingly that "patriarchy is not only male dominance in its strictest sense, but also a persistent ideology of male super-ordination that both men and women maintain consciously and unconsciously. In this system, both men and women are victims" (2002). Sylvia's resignation regarding her lack of control is implied in her shamelessness and her instinctive knowledge as the narrator continues:

Next day he came downstairs to tell her mother: "Your rent is okay, Miss Olive." And there was in her even then no shame as she looked up at him, shaved and neat, his hair well parted and his tie hanging down his chest, for she knew then, already, with that instinctive knowing refined by seventeen years on this hill, that between this man, the rent collector, and her mother, a woman with seven children and no man either, she was the gift arranged even before she knew it, even without the encouragement or connivance of her mother. She was the sacrifice. (Lovelace 1998, 25)

The true guise of Sylvia's masquerade with power is made clear in her limited choice of carnival costumes. In a telling scene with Aldrick, the central male protagonist and her love interest, she describes the type of costume she wants: "It ain't no big expensive costume. You will laugh when I tell you. A . . . slave girl,' she said bashfully. 'You see, it ain't no big expensive costume. You feel I should play a princess or a slave girl?'" (Lovelace 1998, 34). Aldrick's reply is a specific reference to one pattern in carnival of playing a role opposite of what you are: "You is a princess already. . . . Play a slave girl'" (34). But the role-playing here is ironic because, in reality, Sylvia's life suggests more a slave girl, subject to the sexual control of others, especially men.

DANCEHALL QUEENS AND THE CULTURE OF COMPENSATION

Obscenity is repugnant, and it is natural that timid minds should see nothing more to it than this unpleasantness, but it is easy to see that its ignoble sides are connected with the social level of the people who create it, people whom society vomits forth in the same way that they in turn vomit up society.

—Georges Bataille, *Eroticism: Death and Sensuality*

Among other significations, dancehall clothing and contests carnivalize traditional beauty pageants, and these utterances suggest, for instance, a rejection of what Edmondson identifies as "nostalgia for the mythical devout, maternal black woman" (Edmondson 1999, 68). She adds, "The apparently 'brazen' demeanor and deliberately explicit outfits of the female dancehall acolytes . . . are a defiant retort to middle-class attitudes toward poor black women" (68). While traditional "beauty pageants are a curious combination of low-brow culture with high-brow pretensions" (14), dancehall pageantry has no such pretence, but revels shamelessly in the low. Freud's observation of children's lack of shame pertains to the infantilism aspect of my argument: "Small children are essentially without shame, and at some periods of their earliest years show an unmistakable satisfaction in exposing their bodies, with especial emphasis on the sexual parts" (Freud 1962, 58). If the spate of *Hot Mondays* and *Passa Passa* DVDs (available from dancehallreggae.com) are any indication, dancehall girls do seem shameless and indeed appear to take great satisfaction in exposing their bodies, calling special attention to their genitalia.

Edmondson reasons, “In the Caribbean certain popular culture rituals performed by women constitute a kind of ideological ‘work’ that both reflects and furthers the struggles for power among the various ethnicities and classes in the region” (Edmondson 2003, 2). I would add that such ideological work also reflects and furthers the struggle for power between the genders, and it is precisely in the area of such gender matters that the optimism regarding Caribbean female agency through sexual performance seems suspect. Edmondson’s sense of performance and its function (see the introduction to this essay) is quite right, but the particular work done or statement made by dancehall women is less obvious. The implication of agency, an intent, is not the thing itself. For instance, Cooper contends, “The dancehall is the social space in which the smell of female power is exuded in the extravagant display of flashy jewellery, expensive clothes, elaborate hairstyles and rigidly attendant men that altogether represent substantial wealth” (1995, 155). Additionally, in an uncharacteristic, non sequitur moment, she speaks of “women’s enjoyment of sexual and economic independence, as demonstrated in their uninhibited solo wainin [Jamaican variant of “wining”] on the dance floor” (157). A few questions come immediately to mind: Does uninhibited solo wining equal independence? Indeed, is that wining really solo? That is, is it possible for women in the dancehall to view themselves in the spotlight of the male gaze while at the same time articulating their “independence of male scrutiny” (155), or, equally important, male authority? Edmondson suggests, “It is a truism of feminist theory that if the domestic space has traditionally been marked as innately and appropriately feminine, then the public space is masculine, such that any crossing of the boundaries by women from private to public space must be interrogated and assessed as either a proper intervention that preserves the woman’s femininity, or a social violation that masculinizes or otherwise pathologizes her” (2003, 2). But the issue for us is not whether women’s femininity is preserved in dancehall or other eroticized performances. It is whether such performances are liberating!

By way of concluding, let us turn to the film *Dancehall Queen*, one of the texts occasioning Cooper’s views regarding dancehall and women’s agency. First, pertinent to the issue of the control of female bodies, there is a striking parallel between this film and Lovelace’s novel in that in both mothers play a role in men’s sexual exploitation of their daughters: somewhat like Miss Olive and Sylvia, in this case, Marcia allows

her benefactor, Larry, to take advantage of her fifteen-year-old daughter, Tanya. Second, according to Cooper, “Marcia is not inspired to assume the dazzling disguise of Dancehall Queen in order to seduce Larry and divert him from her daughter. . . . It is the prize money, which guarantees a measure of economic independence, however temporary, that motivates Marcia” (2004b, 127). Here, “temporary” is the crucial point. In order to claim the double prizes—the title and the money—Marcia displaces Olivene. How long will it be before Marcia, an interloper of the scene, is displaced?

Third, Cooper proposes, “The persona of ‘dancehall queen’ permits Marcia to savor the sensuality that had been repressed in the drudgery of her everyday existence. As she flaunts the wigs and other accessories so essential to her new role, she is able to attract suitors like the videographer, for whom she becomes the seductive ‘Mystery Lady’ (128). This is true. However, for Larry she becomes the “Sexy Bitch”! And, even courted by the videographer, she is fetishized, as she “unashamedly revels in the male gaze” (128).

The same camera’s eye that “redefines Marcia as a worthy subject of attention” (128) may be seen as objectifying her. In fact, the men behind the cameras remain firmly in control of female dancehall representations: the more typical pattern in the real dancehall is cameras seeking crotch shots of women. Finally, being unashamed is a critical point and it is behind the daughter’s exclamation, “Mama, is that you?” The daughter is really asking her mother if she has no shame in going around dressed inappropriately, in a style and fashion associated with women of a much younger age (this is one of the ways in which she is an interloper). Continuing in a sort of reversal of the mother-daughter role, Tanya questioningly chastises, “You actually went on the road looking like that?” In other words, the mother’s exhibition mark’s a degree of infantilism, a sort of stunted growth and formation initiated by her young motherhood. This much is revealed when Marcia angrily confronts Tanya after Larry threatens to stop playing “Santa Claus” because Tanya will no longer accept the price of his patronage. Bemoaning her interrupted and lost standard education and childhood, Marcia admonishes, “Maybe I should really blame you! From my mother and father throw me out of the house when I was fifteen and pregnant with you. And that was the end of my education.”

It is intriguing that Cooper cites Maggie Humm’s reference to

Laura Mulvey's exposition of the male gaze and mastery over women: "Laura Mulvey first introduced the idea that men looking at women in film use two forms of mastery over her: a sadistic voyeurism which controls women's sexuality through dominating male characters, and a symbolic fetishisation of women's sexuality" (128). Her goal is really Humm's modified reading of "the politics of spectatorship that recognizes the pleasure that women as agents do take in desiring and being desired" (129). But that a woman takes pleasure in being observed does not mean that she is necessarily the agent of the action or that she escapes being a fetish or an object. "In Marcia's case," Cooper claims, "desire—both hers and that of the videographer—rehumanizes her" (129). Was she not human before? Being a street vendor or dressing in working-class clothes does not make her less than human or inhuman. If anything, by abetting Marcia's objectification, her transformation into a mere sexual object, the videographer dehumanizes her. Besides, her humanity is not what is really at stake. What is really at stake is control of her sex, and various men control that: Larry, vicariously, through her daughter, and Priest (one of Larry's henchmen, described by another character, Chalice, as "a wicked, blood clot terrorist"), through violence and the threat of violence. Priest is the type of character who fits among those described by Ruth Dunbar in the Change study as being "on the mental/emotional fringe who will feel no compunction to use the implicit power in the structure of male/female relations at all levels of the society, to beat others into submission to their will, to exercise sexual power over the powerless" (1982, 10).

Cooper believes that "the patterns of seduction and entrapment encoded in folktale are archetypes, surviving in the contemporary dancehall in new guises" (2004b, 144). If this is the case, the question, then, is who is seduced and who is ultimately trapped? Even while she contests the overly simplistic reading of the male dancehall posture as wholly misogynistic, Donna Hope acknowledges that being dominated by males is a likely outcome for dancehall women, a reflection of the woman's condition in Jamaican society at large: "Closer examination of the lyrics themselves, together with discussions with dancehall song creators, disseminators and consumers reveal that these manifestations are symbols utilised by the male in his attempt to court, conquer, subjugate and ultimately defeat that feared other, the female" (2002). Last but not least, Change cites Peggy Antrobus, who observes of Jamaica

that “while the laws and institutions proclaim equality, the values, attitudes and practices of the whole society create a milieu in which women are considered to be subordinate, lacking in confidence, oppressed and in general outside the main-stream of power and decision making” (qtd. in Change 1982, 7). With such a milieu firmly entrenched in Jamaica and other parts of the Caribbean, women may perform self-control, but their sexual displays remain lacking in real power.

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NOTE

1. (i) Dancehall is akin to hip hop in that it encompasses an entire expressive culture emergent from Jamaica. The following are among the culture’s components: (a) Dancehall music is the drum machine, sample-based music that has arguably surpassed both calypso and traditional, one-drop reggae in economic, social, and cultural impact the world over; this type of music is rooted in competing sound systems in which the selector (*selektah*) plays the music while the DJ, somewhat like a rapper, toasts or chats over the rhythm (*riddim*) in rapid-style delivery, by turns enlivening, exhorting, or admonishing the crowd (*massive*), often by boasting of sexual exploits or celebrating female sexuality. (b) The dancehall crowd, or *massive*, includes both observing and performing men and women. However, the women (*dancehall girls*) gain more attention for dressing up or, especially for dressing provocatively, including dressing down. Video men (to date I have not observed or heard of a woman in this role) shine bright spotlights on these women, who compete for the camera’s eye by gyrating or dancing in otherwise sexually explicit ways (the “Dutty Wine” or Dirty Wine is one such craze; “Willy Bounce” is another). There are related competitions for Dancehall Queen, and there seems to be a direct correlation between the increase in prize money for these events and the increased sexual explicitness in dance and dress. (c) Dancehall is also an interior or exterior setting where the dancehall *massive* gathers to revel. In these spaces, in addition to dancehall music, other forms may be played, including R & B and soca.

(ii) Carnival refers to the setting, the ideal, and the manifestation of ritualistic and riotous feasting, merrymaking, and masquerading leading up to Lent. Understanding carnival associated with the Caribbean not merely in terms of space, time, penitence and purging, but as an ideal, is important given its shifty and shifting

nature both in the region and among the diaspora, where some carnivalesque celebrations are combined with other purposes and take place at other times of the year.

(iii) By soca I mean both the musical genre in which soul and calypso are blended and the partying associated with that music. In most contemporary Caribbean dancehalls (especially the interior spaces where people gather to party), soca is major component of the musical selection and, like dancing in dancehall, dancing or “wining” to soca music can be very sexually suggestive. Having said that, it is worth noting that dancehall has had an increasing hegemonic influence on soca music and dance.

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