



Moving Dancehall Off the Island: Female Sexuality and Club Culture in Toronto

[Karen Flynn](#)

Associate Professor
University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign, IL, USA

Abstract

While there has been an exciting growth in scholarship on dancehall culture, primarily in the fields of cultural and literary studies as they relate to Jamaica, more attention needs to be given to its configuration in other geographical locations and other popular culture arenas. This article explores dancehall culture from a geographic site, in Toronto, which, despite its large Caribbean population, is often a mere footnote in larger diasporic studies. Moving beyond the proclivity of viewing dancehall culture and music from a purely patriarchal misogynistic viewpoint, the article focuses on the redemptive and empowering possibilities that this popular Black expressive form holds. It underscores how dancehall culture and music challenge hegemonic scripts predicated on stereotypes of Black women's sexuality. Despite the contradictions inherent in the music and the performance of female artists such as Lady Saw and Tanya Stephens, dancehall culture evokes women as active agents who are able to articulate their sexual desires.

Keywords: sexuality, dancehall music, Black/Caribbean women, dance

Dedication

This article is dedicated to KaosKrew (especially Philip Cole), Slim & Trim (Michael Banfield and Leslie Corion) DJ's Quincy, Bobby B, Mark Anthony, Mike Gibbs, Wayne; my brother DJ Extacy (Dwayne Reynolds), Eddie Williams, Andy Coward, the late Michael Charles and Dorian Major (RIP) and the rest of the Tdot promoters. Thanks for the wonderful memories!

Introduction

For the majority of Caribbean people, migration remains the primary route to economic mobility. Following the Second World War, Caribbean migrants, some of whom were recruited, left *en masse* for Britain where they helped to alleviate the labour shortage and rebuild that country. As British subjects, Caribbean people had the legal right to migrate and settle there. Transformations in US immigration policies with the Hart-Celler Immigration Bill in 1965, and Canada in 1962 and 1967, coupled with the need for semi-skilled and skilled labour, led to a flow of Caribbean migrants, mainly to New York and Toronto. The largest number of Caribbean migrants came from Jamaica. As Caribbean migrants were incorporated into these societies, primarily as workers, the cultural expressive forms of the Caribbean were also exported. Moreover, technological developments in the field of communications, such as the World Wide Web, have accelerated access to all types of Caribbean cultural products.

In Toronto, Eglinton Avenue West¹, affectionately dubbed "Little Jamaica", is home to a number of businesses ranging from record and patty shops to restaurants, hair salons, grocery and clothing stores. The *Jamaica Gleaner* newspaper and the Jamaica National Building Society have established offices on this strip. Whereas businesses in this location cater to Caribbean clientele of all nationalities, it is impossible to walk or drive along Eglinton West without recognizing the strong Jamaican presence in the everyday hustle and bustle of this transnational space. Daily, Jamaica in its multifacetedness is heard in the reggae and dancehall music that compete for "ear time" and in the lingering smell of Jamaican cuisine that wafts through the open windows of cars and buses, especially during the summer. Different groups of Caribbean people who make their way to Eglinton West from the suburbs of Mississauga, Maple, Woodbridge and Brampton add to its atmosphere. Many have come to support the Caribbean-owned businesses, while others come to take a piece of Jamaica back to their homes by buying groceries and other products. Then

there are the few Jamaicans, mostly men, peddling the latest CDs, DVDs, or other wares as they beg you to “buy sometingnuh.” It is on Eglington West, albeit in a reconfigured form, that those who nostalgically long for Jamaica can find some semblance of familiarity.

While there has been an exciting growth in scholarship on dancehall culture, primarily in the fields of cultural and literary studies as they relate to Jamaica (Stolzoff 2000; Cooper 1995, 2000; Hope 2006), more attention needs to be given to its configuration in other geographical locations and other popular culture arenas.² Apart from the work of artists who memorialize geographic spaces such as Toronto in their songs, dancehall as a cultural phenomenon has yet to be fully explored. This essay makes an empirical contribution to the current scholarship by exploring dancehall culture from a geographic site, in Toronto, which, despite its large Caribbean population, is often a mere footnote in larger diasporic studies. I begin to answer these queries in the popular culture arena with an ethnographic account of how my friends and I encountered dancehall music while living in a predominantly white suburb outside Toronto during the late 1980s and early 1990s. I discuss my scholarly foray into dancehall culture, with emphasis on the music. I then utilize a Black Canadian feminist perspective³, coupled with selected lyrics of female DJs, Tanya Stephens and Lady Saw, to demonstrate how these artists provide a counternarrative within the constraints of a patriarchal society to talk and think about Black female sexuality.

As with most other Black expressive cultural forms, men dominate the production and dissemination of dancehall music, not only as artists, but also as producers, promoters, songwriters, DJs, and the owners of spaces where dancehall is consumed. With respect to the actual music, the lyrics tend to focus overwhelmingly on heterosexual sex, a focus that, according to Carolyn Cooper, “often requires a precise listing of body parts, almost exclusively female and an elaboration of mechanical function” (Cooper 1995, 142). Yet, unlike other Black cultural forms of production, dancehall culture enjoys an overwhelmingly

female following. Given this reality, how do female DJs and consumers of dancehall music negotiate a space/place in this male-dominated sphere? Furthermore, since dancehall music and production are primarily male-controlled, and social relations and sexuality are shaped by power, is it possible for women to be autonomous sexual agents? If so, what does such agency look like? Can Caribbean/Black women find ways to engage in healthy sexual pleasure via dancehall culture? Caribbean feminist scholars have begun to tackle these questions from both a theoretical and empirical perspective. In delineating the essentialist configurations of gender, Patricia Mohammed provides a framework to tackle the questions raised above. She posits that “we negotiate the middle ground between the mind and body, between reason and emotion, between social acceptability and ostracism, between gender norms and sexual identity” (2002, xiv).

Keeping in mind Mohammed’s analysis, I focus on dancehall culture in Toronto, with an emphasis on music and dancing. I engage the redemptive and empowering possibilities that dancehall music holds in challenging hegemonic scripts predicated on stereotypes of Black women’s sexuality. While dancehall culture is specific to Jamaica, it traverses international boundaries and is visible in other Caribbean enclaves such as Toronto, New York, Miami, and London, where it appears in a hybrid form as ragga. Indeed, the success of dancehall culture owes as much or even more to its international audiences as it does to local audiences. Donna Hope (2006) argues that “indeed since Bob Marley’s international success as Jamaica’s premier reggae artist, dancehall has proven the most commercially successful form of Jamaican music to date” (22). Hope points to Shabba Ranks, Shaggy, and Sean Paul, among other artists, who have won Grammy awards, as well as those “that have successfully broken into the Japanese, European, and North American markets” (Ibid). Of course, the ascendance of some of these artists in the global arena is not without controversy as overseas audiences sometimes take issue with the content of some of the artists’ songs.⁴

Despite its popularity, dancehall music culture activates and re-enacts discursive and material tensions, particularly those around gender visibility in the larger society. That is, at the same time that women are marginalized — for example, as selectors (disc jockeys who play the music), as promoters (people who plan and organize dancehall events), and as artists — they do make claims to the space in ways that are empowering. Still, dancehall music and culture are not produced in a vacuum, but are intricately tied to and constituted by larger political, economic, and social struggles. Despite the ambivalence surrounding dancehall culture and music, it is difficult to overlook how this sphere of artistic expression simultaneously challenges conservative sexual ideologies while bringing the voices of the disaffected to the fore.

Setting the Context: Dancehall as an Oppositional Culture

Dancehall music emerged during the early 1980s in the midst of political and economic turmoil in Jamaica. The overwhelming victory of the Jamaica Labour Party (JLP) under the leadership of Edward Seaga in the early 1980s did very little in the long run to alleviate the country's economic troubles. In the midst of an international recession and an already fragile economic climate at home, the JLP borrowed more money from the International Monetary Fund (IMF) with the goal of stabilizing the economy. The campaign promise of "deliverance" by the JLP did not materialize. Violence erupted across the island, despite the efforts of then opposition leader Michael Manley of the People's National Party (PNP). Decades later, the perils of globalization have left the children of those who might have benefited from PNP policies disillusioned and disenfranchised. Currently in Jamaica, unemployment levels remain high, violence is endemic in the inner cities, and the masses of people barely have the necessities to survive.⁵ Those exposed to the exigencies of "downpression"⁶ are forced to develop creative forms of expression to elucidate their social reality. In this context, dancehall culture, with all its complexities and contradictions, emerged as the voice of the downtrodden. Meanwhile, in

Toronto, Jamaicans, other Caribbean migrants, and their children confront the racial, gender, and economic inequalities that permeate Canadian society. In response, they too have opted to embrace aspects of dancehall culture as it speaks to their own marginalized sensibilities. Indeed, this tendency remains unabated as current African-Caribbean youth, according to Lisa Tomlinson (2012), because of their alienation from the larger Canadian society "maintain ongoing and close ties with reggae, dancehall, and African-American hip hop culture" (21).

As a transnational and oppositional expressive culture, dancehall music challenges and unsettles middle-class Caribbean peoples' Judeo-Christian sensibilities about morality, sexuality and gender relations. In fact, dancehall culture unhinges and makes visible those entrenched hierarchies based on race, class, gender, sexuality and geographic locale. Essentially, dancehall is an extension of and reminiscent of the larger society that contemporary diasporic Black women occupy. To accuse dancehall culture of women's subordination effaces the structural inequality which has spawned slavery, colonialism, imperialism, Judeo-Christianity and global capitalism. This is not to negate dancehall's own support of patriarchal ideals visible in the promotion of male sexual aggression and lyrics that denigrate women. However, the music and the dancehall physical space are mediated by women's own assertions of their sexual autonomy and changing gender relations.

Since its inception, hegemonic representation of male sexuality in dancehall culture centres on the image of DJs (men) who are biologically blessed with staying power in the bedroom. Those who fall short are encouraged to try aphrodisiacs, such as stone and Chini brush, Irish moss, and linseed. In the world of the dancehall, vaginal penetration is the suggested method to engage in sexual intercourse. Other sexual practices such as fellatio, cunnilingus and masturbation are highly discouraged, the first two due primarily to reasons advanced by Judeo-Christianity and Rastafarianism, and the latter as a result of social sanctioning.

Still, the emphasis on multiple sexual partners persists. Thus, the idea that there are more than enough women who are willing to make themselves available physically as sexual partners eliminates the option, at least in theory, of masturbation, at least for men. Furthermore, dominant dancehall discourse often ignores problems such as financial instability, unemployment, and premature ejaculation, any of which can affect sexual intimacy. In the fantasy world of the dancehall, intercourse by penetration remains one of the primary ways in which masculinity is asserted and reinforced. At the same time, the interventions of female DJs and women as consumers of dancehall have made unstable and visible claims to a hegemonic masculinity. Indeed, women not only claim but also contest hegemonic masculinity.

In discussing the reification of masculinity in dancehall culture, Jarrett Brown (1999) notes that “this brand of masculinity functions as a charismatic voice that objectifies the woman and her body as a site of sadistic pleasure in the sex act. In this case, sex becomes a ritual for asserting, initiating and producing manhood” (5). While there is certainly merit to Brown’s suppositions, the argument that all sex acts indicate objectification denies women’s agency over the choices they make before, during and after sexual intercourse. In essence, this argument holds that women are victims to a coercive male sexuality. Additionally, this response suggests that it is primarily through heterosexual sex that women are subjugated. Furthermore, this position does not account for the ways in which women, whether as DJs or consumers, make sexual claims within dancehall culture that challenge common sense and essentialist ideas about male sexuality. Finally, this assertion obscures the multiple ways women and girls find pleasure in dancehall music and culture.

Consuming Dancehall Culture: My Personal and Scholarly Journey

In the late 1980s and early 1990s, my friends and I sang along and danced to those songs most notably concerned with the vagina, or in dancehall

vernacular punani, punash or glamitti. Simultaneously, the penis (hood, buddy) was always active and performing to a willing and waiting punani. Unbeknownst to us, a debate in and outside Jamaica was being waged, culminating in the “slackness” versus culture dichotomy. In attempting to ascertain the popularity of slack songs defined as those with emphasis on “crude and often insulting wordplay pronouncing on sexuality and sexual antagonism” (Gilroy 1992, 118), gun talk, and homophobia, scholars point to a number of factors. Norman Stolzoff maintains that the violence in dancehall is connected to the political climate of the late 1980s and early 1990s. For Stolzoff, the disillusionment among the masses of Jamaicans began with the failure of both Manley’s democratic socialist agenda and Seaga’s liberal policies. Stolzoff and Paul Gilroy also pointed to the death of Bob Marley, a new generation of artists, label demands, and the lack of influence that songwriters and singers had under Manley, which launched a movement away from roots music to lyrics that stressed competition, gun talk, and sex (Stolzoff 2000; Gilroy 1992).

Foregrounding issues of class and status among Jamaicans, Carolyn Cooper argues that “slackness” transcends the sexual politics of dancehall culture. She points out that “slackness” speaks to the disillusionment of working-class men with the lack of economic opportunities and the inability of the state to address these issues. Part of the answer to the rise of slackness in dancehall music may also be found in the scholarship of Keith Nurse (2004) and Linden Lewis (2005) on Caribbean masculinity. Both scholars point to the changing political, social, and economic landscape that has led to a redefinition of women’s conventional roles. Feminists’ struggles have led to the movement of women into purviews traditionally defined as male, and the consequences of industrialization and globalization have left few available opportunities for poor young Black men. Sonjah Niaah Stanley (2005), however, insists that the culture versus “slackness” debate is reductionist at best and pushes for a more complicated analysis that considers, for example, migration, and how dancehall has been defined over time, among other factors.

Theoretical discussions, when translated into practice, however, remain much more complicated, as reflected in how my friends and I engaged with dancehall music in the clubs and dances we frequented. First, a disc jockey's repertoire of songs was never limited to those defined as "slackness". Regardless of the fact that for each female artist we heard during the night there were at least five male artists, disc jockeys injected women's voices into the collection of songs they played. Thus we knew the words verbatim to songs such as Shelly Thunder's "Kuff"⁷ and Lady G's "Nuff Respect."⁸ Thunder's "Kuff" tackles male infidelity and Lady G's "Nuff Respect" takes the form of a female anthem imploring women to be independent. Equally important, we did not leave the clubs without a dose of those songs that fell into the realm of the "culture" or lovers' rock camp⁹. For at least an hour at Ocean 11, Mark Anthony played artists such as Junior Reid, Peter Tosh, Marcia Griffiths, and Bob Marley, whose songs are known for their political and social commentary. From our perspective, there was no distinction between the cultural and "slack" songs that we heard; they simply existed on a continuum, each serving different purposes.

Ironically, artists who were vehemently criticized for condoning and promoting "slackness" also sang songs that fell into the cultural realm. This, of course, is in keeping with a Black cultural tradition that fuses the multifaceted ontological dimensions of Black life. Given this variability, it was difficult to compartmentalize these songs as either cultural or "slack". For example, Shabba Ranks, noted for epitomizing "slackness" and all that it embodies, sang "Reality".¹⁰ Here, Ranks critiques white supremacy and the evils of apartheid, while urging Black self-reflexivity, which begins with recognizing one's connection to Africa. Thus, Ranks signals the fortitude of diasporic connections over time and space. Ranks's "Reality" spoke to my political racial sensibilities. I had not yet discovered feminism, which was probably for the best, given all the stereotypes circulating about feminists at that time.

Negotiating “Slackness” On the Dance Floor

As my friends and I positioned ourselves weekly on various dance floors, were we oblivious to the vulgarity of some of the lyrics, particularly those that incessantly focused on the punani (vagina)? Nevilla explained, “No, I didn’t listen to all the lyrics back then, if the beat sounded good, I just followed the crowd” (Nevilla S., e-mail correspondence with author, 3 November 2005). Gina, who is much younger than I, admitted to listening to the words. She states, “Yes I found them a bit shocking in a racy kind of way, but it added to the eroticism of the music and the dance moves that accompanied it” (Gina L., e-mail correspondence with author, 1 November 2005). Yet some of us who recited the words verbatim to the punani songs did not make the connection between our punanis and the ones the DJs referenced in song. For me, the punanis did not belong to us, or anyone else, for that matter. Debbie added, “I enjoyed the comfort that these songs gave me, because I was new in a country to which I did not feel like I belonged. Also dancing to these songs made me feel that my punani was the best thing since sliced bread” (Debbie M., e-mail correspondence with author, 2 November 2005). Gina and Debbie both echo the sentiments of Black British feminists such as Denise Noble (2000), who sees ragga music as celebrating Black womanhood, a welcome alternative to how Black women’s bodies have historically been perceived.

While listening to dancehall music and memorizing lyrics were important to my friends and me, dancing, which also involved where, how, and whom we danced with, was the highlight of our outings. My friends and I competed to see who knew and could master the latest dance moves. Does this mean that our dancing was “innocent”? What about the voyeuristic gaze of the men who often stood on the periphery of the dance floor watching those “vulgar” moves we performed? How did these voyeurs construct their own understanding of our pleasure? Even though we were conscious of being watched, in some ways, our dancing was “innocent”. We lacked the analytical sophistication that would later be inspired by feminist theorizing to recognize how our bodies were

construed as sites to be objectified. At the same time, we did not need feminism to realize how the dance floor, as a social space, reproduces certain power relations.

Men often read our gyrating and “provocative” bodies as sites where masculinist practices could be enacted. That is, these onlookers imbued our bodies with sexual meanings, which translated into unwanted touches and gyrations, especially from behind. This unnecessary attention occasionally disrupted our pleasure. Indeed, the club space was hardly devoid of sexist practices. While Nevilla enjoyed the music and the people, “the atmosphere was not always inviting” (Nevilla S., e-mail correspondence with author, 3 November 2005). If we declined to dance, frowned at an unwanted touch, or ignored offers for a drink, we were sometimes subjected to a barrage of verbal insults from young and middle-aged men alike. Indeed, some people were unwilling to accept the reality that, while we enjoyed male attention, our presence in these spaces had less to do with attracting men and more about our own enjoyment. In the interstice of this male-defined and male-controlled space, we developed resistance strategies, ranging from self-regulation and accommodation to outright defiance. Trips to the bathroom were a group endeavour because the men hung out by the entrance. We often “talked back” at men who were abrasive or simply disregarded any gesture hinting at any form of intrusion in the space we occupied on the dance floor. Likewise, we danced with, and enjoyed the company of, young men who acted in a non-threatening manner. There were occasions where we intentionally posed with men to prevent potential harassment.

Certainly, then, we were not unconscious dupes who enjoyed all dancehall songs or supported all artists. Whether we heard them in concert, in the confines of our homes, in the clubs, or at a dance, we had our preferences. We liked certain DJs’ voices, lyrics and rhythms, and disliked others. In the final analysis, however, we liked the songs that, along with a hyped crowd, friends,

good food, and an experienced disc jockey, enriched and enhanced our cultural connections in these spaces.

In graduate school, I began to think seriously about dancehall music and all that it purportedly engendered, when a colleague interrogated my complicity in a culture she deemed as inherently misogynistic. Unable to adequately explain how I negotiated my feminist principles with my enjoyment of the music, my colleague told me that I was “a walking contradiction”. Apparently, I symbolized in the flesh women whom feminists characterized as exhibiting a “false consciousness”. By uncritically participating in this culture, I was apparently colluding in my own victimization.¹¹ How could I explain the dichotomy between the music that in those tumultuous teenage years provided my friends and me with a sense of belonging and the recognition, as I moved into my late twenties and early thirties, that this music was being singled out as contributing to women’s subjugation?¹² In retrospect, I concur with Leslie Goftit (1991) that “pleasure is a key element in structuring the relationship of the cultural form. It also helps to explain how we might engage in contradictory activities within forms of popular culture, appearing to consent to dominant patriarchal practices and our own social regulation” (177).

Thus, my scholarly interest in dancehall culture, at least as I experienced it in a Canadian diasporic space, was partially a reaction to my colleague, but was also precipitated by other encounters. In graduate school, for example, I sat on a panel for Black History Month entitled “Dancehall: ‘Slackness’ or ‘Culture’”, which aired on CHRY 105.5, York University’s Community Radio Station. The individuals on the panel hailed from various segments of the entertainment industry, but they shared a common nostalgic longing for Rastafarian-inspired music, with its well-known penchant for political and social commentary. As the only upcoming academic and youngest member on the panel, I attempted to complicate the “slackness” versus “culture” antinomy, only to be rebuffed. In no uncertain terms, my fellow panellists informed me that my short life span and feminist-influenced theorizing did not give me the licence

to engage in “adult” discussions about “culture.” But it is precisely the perspectives of consumers of dancehall culture such as myself and my friends that help to complicate the debate such as the one mentioned above.

Feminism and Dancehall Culture

Given the dominance of men as DJs and performers in dancehall, what role do female DJs play? Do they reproduce similar themes to those of their male counterparts? Is there anything subversive in their narratives? Notwithstanding the importance of DJs such as those mentioned earlier and pioneers such as Sista Nancy and Sista Carol, it is Tanya Stephens and Lady Saw, in my opinion, who have been consistently instrumental in engaging with dominant ideas about the construction of female and male sexuality. Indeed, in the heteronormative sphere of the dancehall, Stephens and Saw simultaneously competed with, contradicted, and affirmed dancehall and societal sexual discourses evident in their lyrics and particularly the latter's live performances.

To appreciate the multiple functions that female dancehall DJs play is to first acknowledge Black women's historical sexual legacy. Since slavery, Black women's sexuality has been constructed as an aberration, thereby justifying the acts of violence meted out towards them by plantation owners. Of course, this pathologized sexuality has been reworked to fit contemporary contexts. The historical baggage surrounding the construction of Black women's sexuality has yet to be discarded, and the realities of modernity have resulted in much ambivalence. Despite the hypersexual terrain of North America, with unlimited access to the oversexualized images of Black female bodies via Black Entertainment Television (BET), MTV and other media outlets, such images tend to reinforce and commodify Black female sexuality. Kamala Kempadoo (2009) notes in relation to the Caribbean that “sexuality is simultaneously hyper visible and obscure, that is celebrated in popular culture as an important ingredient in Caribbean social life...yet is shrouded in double entendre, secrecy and

shame" (1). Erica Lawson (2103) in her study on Caribbean-Canadian mothers and daughters noted that "secrecy about sex and sexuality is a common reality in the lives of many Black women" (113).

Although the definition and construction of sexuality is always contested, Black female sexual subjectivities, regardless of geographical locations, remain embattled and distorted. Thus, Hortense Spillers' (1989) insightful commentary that "Black women are the beached whales of the sexual universe, unvoiced, mis-seen, not doing, awaiting their verb" (74) partially holds true. The redemptive possibilities lie in Stephens's and Saw's ability to help create alternative visions and ideas that push the boundaries, revealing an empowered sexuality. They help to break the silence and make visible Caribbean/Black women's sexual subjectivities, accomplishing for Caribbean/Black women what the blues did for African-American working-class women.¹³

In 1997, Stephens released "Too Hype". I heard the hit single "YuhNuhReady Fi Dis Yet" being played at a variety of venues throughout Toronto. The song was also on regular rotation on reggae shows that aired on university radio stations. It also generated a passionate response from young women on the dance floor of Toronto clubs such as Studio 69. When Stephens asks, "But have yuh ever stop to think whamek a gal cheat, Yuh need fi check yuh self before yuh start kiss yuh teeth", the disc jockey then resorted to call-and-response¹⁴. He would lower Stephens' voice and the women (who obviously knew the words by heart) would scream "...YuhNuh Ready Fi Dis Yet", while looking directly at the men as if in conversation with them. In what is often a male-defined space, these young women were returning the gaze through a song with which they obviously identified.

To be sure, dancehall lyrics remain polysemic and open to multiple interpretations. That is, we sometimes interpret texts, whether movies or songs, based on our own social location, which may impart a meaning different from what the author intended. Therefore, as Peter Manuel (1998) maintains, "the social meaning of a song cannot be unproblematically 'read off' of the lyrics by

an analyst, however well-versed in modern literary theory he or she may be" (1). Additionally, there is clearly more at work in the spaces of dancehall music and culture than attention to lyrics only, as Debbie explains:

At that time, I did not listen to [songs] to critique them, but to sing along to the songs and to do the moves at the right moment. I did not find these songs offensive, instead moving to the songs made me feel as if I was back home in Jamaica. For me, it was my comfort of missing home (Debbie M., e-mail correspondence with author, 2 November 2005).

While keeping Manuel's argument in mind, a few inferences can be drawn about "YuhNuh Ready Fi Dis Yet", which is clearly a directive to men. From the young women's reaction to the song, it is clear that the lyrics resonated with them. It is possible that these female club goers identified with the men to which Stephens referred. Moreover, it is also likely that as young heterosexual women they had similar queries about the men in their own or their friends' lives. Maybe these women had wanted to, or had, asked the incisive question put forth by Stephens regarding the process of achieving an orgasm: "Have yuhever wonder what mek a girl cum"?

Deeply embedded in North American and Caribbean culture — despite the gains made by the women's movement — is the notion that women's sexual desires are secondary to men. Stephens insists otherwise: "A woman fus fi satisfy before yuhseyyuh done." The notion that women deserve and want to be sexually fulfilled remains a novel idea for some men. In return, women are socialized to be silent about sex and sexuality and refrain from speaking about their sexual desires and needs with their partners. It is no wonder that, as Paula Webster (1989) argues, "Many of us still stand at the border of our desires hesitating, complaining, berating ourselves and/or our lovers for the sexual deprivation we live with and feel helpless to change" (392). Thus, Stephen's "YuhNuh Ready Fi Dis Yet" is part of the conversation.

While Stephens' and Saw's lyrics abound with sexual metaphors, they are also explicit and provocative. Thus, a second function these artists serve is to challenge certain sexual taboos. In so doing, they give Black women permission to expand their opportunities for sexual pleasure within the confines of a patriarchal culture. In this light, Stephens' "Draw Mi Finger" is all the more remarkable given how stigmatized the practice is. Here, Stephens bemoans being left unsatisfied by a partner who fell asleep following sexual intercourse:

Cause when some a dem dun wuk
wehaffi draw wi finger
Cann tell yu how much di heat still a linger
Bwoy gone a sleep lef me hot like ginger ... (Stephens 1997).

In her study, *Stolen Women: Reclaiming Our Sexuality, Taking Back Our Lives*, Gail Elizabeth Wyatt (1997) pointed out that "Black women ages 18 to 50...may never masturbate at any time in their lives." In fact, she noted that "81 per cent of Black women had never even touched their breasts or genitals to the point of sexual arousal" (156). More recent studies have confirmed Wyatt's finding regarding the lack of acceptance around masturbation for African-American women.¹⁵ These women explained that religious and cultural sanctioning prevented them from touching their own bodies. While these studies are specific to the United States, anecdotal evidence from more current research suggests that similar attitudes exist among Black women in Canada. By encouraging Black/Caribbean women to engage in clitoral self-stimulation, Stephens challenges the pervasiveness of the sexual script in and beyond the borders of dancehall that endorses heterosexual sex and vaginal penetration by the penis as the primary method for women to engage in sexual fulfillment.

Stephens' advocacy for self-pleasuring, where cultural and sexual norms dictate otherwise, is certainly empowering. As Bowman ¹⁶(2014) intimates, "When a woman masturbates, she experiences her sexuality in a way that does not conform to dominant expectations about femininity or female sexuality...she

feels sexual sensations that are not provided by a partner... she need not concern herself with anyone's pleasure but her own" (2). Moving beyond self-clitoral touch, the inability to touch one's breast has other ramifications in terms of Black women's overall health. Black women in the US are more likely to die from breast cancer than their white counterparts because of a much later diagnosis of the illness. Of course, racism, socio-economic status, and cultural differences further act as barriers to Black women's health (Ali et al. 2003; Flynn and Taylor 2009). Stephens' "Draw Mi Finger" can be redefined to include not just personal sexual pleasure but what it means for Black women to live healthy lives overall.

Stephens' CD, "Too Hype", is counterhegemonic, and it does more than unhinge prevailing ideas about male sexuality; the CD articulates a transgressive female sexuality that embodies and encourages female agency and supports Caribbean women's popular sexual pleasure. At the same time, Stephens does not engage in "matie" style competition, a practice celebrated in dancehall culture, whereby women compete for the attention of men who often are entitled to multiple sexual partners. Often, the matie is positioned vis-à-vis the wife or other women. "Too Hype" to run "back-a man" and "be number two" (Stephens 1997), Stephens takes a stand against being set up as a matie. In her two other CDs since *Too Hype*, Stephens continues to challenge male constructions of female sexuality.¹⁷

While Lady Saw's lyrics compared to those of her male counterparts are equally, or in some cases more, explicit and raw, she bears harsher criticism, and, in some cases, is punished for her explicit lyrics. This "double standard" inside and outside of dancehall culture operates as a form of social control to censure "bad girls," such as Saw, who cuss or speak openly and graphically about sex. The knee-jerk response of Saw's critics is to argue that she has internalized the ideals of a patriarchal and sexist culture that teaches some women that they can succeed by adopting the similar misogynistic attitudes expressed by their male counterparts. The proof, besides the crude lyrics, lies in

how these songs also pit women against each other (in the *matie* role) or have them acting as the man's woman as exemplified in "Eh-Em Eh-Em". According to Saw, "Whol heap a gal a lust off a mi eh-em eh-em, Gal a carry malice through mi eh-em eh-em" (Saw 1998). While these themes of rivalry and jealous competition among and between women are definitely common themes in Saw's songs, she is hardly the main arbiter of such a view. Saw's male counterparts are equally contentious, yet they hardly receive similar comments (Cooper 2000).

Like Stephens, Saw also interrogates the myth of male virility, pushes for female sexual independence and challenges hegemonic notions of proper female behaviour. For example, the song "Heist it up" begins with a firm declaration that women are every bit as sexually aggressive as their male counterparts and possess the capacity to perform in the bedroom leaving men "screaming and begging for more" (Saw 1998). Yet, Saw expects that any engagement in sexual intercourse is reciprocal. The idea here is that a man should be able to provide maximum sexual pleasure. She explains as follows:

Some bwoymussitink we easy
Dem nuh know we wann man fi please we
If demcaan handle dat tell dem fi go gogo
Cause hot gal wiwaan man fi grease wi ... (Saw 1998).

Here, Saw renders an unequivocal challenge to prevailing gender norms about Caribbean sexuality.

As Cooper points out, Lady Saw is not a one-dimensional artist, even though "slackness" is her preferred mode of style. Like Shabba Ranks and other so-called "slackness" DJs, Saw also performs a number of politically and socially conscious songs. I witnessed Lady Saw on stage in Minneapolis in 2004, where she performed to a mixed audience. Saw was explicit, graphic and outrageously funny. The monologues she interspersed throughout her

performance were geared towards both genders. She encouraged women to make sure their vaginas were attractive and that the men needed to work on cleanliness and their bedroom performance. Saw's performance was difficult for female members of the audience. Several young women attempted to admonish Saw for convoluting, for some, an activity that is "pure" with her "dirty" talk. Saw responded by telling one young woman that her rawness is what she is known for. In other words, they had the option of leaving the show if they were uncomfortable. The audience seemed pleased when Saw brought a man from the audience onstage and gyrated while he lay on the floor motionless. Saw also brought individual men and women and a couple on the stage primarily for a "wining" competition¹⁸, chiding them at different moments for being uncomfortable and stiff. Besides demonstrating her obvious skills as a DJ, Saw seemed to be pushing for a less constricted atmosphere whereby sexual discourses can be as much public as they are private. Unlike other artists I have seen in performance, Saw also encouraged her audience to engage in safer sex. Given the high incidence of HIV/AIDS among the demographics in the audience¹⁹, her attention to issues of protected sex was certainly warranted.

The reaction of the young women, while mediated by a number of factors, reveals how uncomfortable discussions of sexuality remain. Despite the pervasiveness of hypersexuality embodied primarily in popular culture, a great deal of confusion and embarrassment around sex and sexuality persist. My own class discussions with my predominantly female students challenge the perception that women are liberated in relation to their sexual experiences and behaviours. Despite the feminist movement's commitment to women's sexual liberation, my students' desires, inquiries, and concerns are dictated by cultural rules, norms and trends that deem certain behaviours acceptable and others taboo. These students point to the catch-22 in which they often find themselves in terms of their sexuality — you are a slut if you do have sex or plenty of it, and frigid or a tease if you abstain. Moreover, Black female students' struggles are intensified due to the historical baggage of a pathologized sexuality, which continues to permeate their psyche. In addition, they point to the misogyny and

sexism prevalent in hip-hop, which makes it difficult to conduct meaningful discussions about sexuality. It is hardly surprising, then, that such young women cringe when listening to Lady Saw.

Conclusion

Artists such as Saw and Stephens are critical to redefining the narrow and limiting ways in which Black women's sexuality is currently viewed. It involves moving beyond the "positive" vs. "negative" binary that seems to preoccupy some scholars, to get at how Black women as actors negotiate their engagement with Black popular cultural forms such as dancehall culture. On a practical level, Saw and Stephens' music can serve as a pedagogical tool to engage Black women, regardless of geographical location, in candid discussions about sex and sexuality. Instead of scholars viewing these artists as merely succumbing to patriarchal ideals, we should acknowledge their contributions to a discourse that empowers Black female sexual subjectivities. Both artists, despite their contradictions and inconsistencies, legitimize the notion of women as desirable sexual subjects who initiate and enjoy sex as much as men. Through their lyrics and performances, Stephens and Saw evoke women as active agents who are able to articulate their sexual desires. In addition, they encourage women to make sex a dynamic, affirming, and pleasurable aspect of their lives.

¹Black Uhuru recorded the song "Youth of Eglinton", a commentary on youth violence. See, Walker (2012).

²There are a few exceptions, notably, Sterling's (2012, 2010, and 2006); in Toronto, a few scholars have looked at popular culture which often includes a nod at dancehall or reggae. See, for example, Walker (2012). Tomlinson (2012) includes a discussion of Carla Marshall, Canada's dancehall queen whose "musical image echoed that of Lady Saw." See, also, Flynn and Marrast (2008).

³A Black Canadian feminist perspective that foregrounds and grapples with the intersections of race, culture, religion, identity, nation, sexuality, and gender in the development of Canada as a white settler colony that often positions itself as a raceless society. See, for example, Flynn (forthcoming); Massaquoi and Wane (2007).

⁴See, for example, Saunders (2003).

⁵Jamaica is near the top of the list of countries with high homicide rates. In 2008, the murder rate was 60 per 100,000, one of the highest in the world (UNODC Homicide Statistics) as quoted in Ford-Smith (2011).

⁶Instead of using the term oppression, Rastafarians coined the term "downpression" to underscore the magnitude of inequality.

⁷<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Bs0i2KxUjU8>. Shelly Thunder, "Kuff," Accessed 24 September 2010

⁸<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HAnHRXvPPuU>, "Nuff Respect," Accessed 24 September 2010

⁹Lovers' rock refers to music with a romantic emphasis.

¹⁰<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HAnHRXvPPuU>. Shabba Ranks, "Reality".

¹¹See, Kalinowsky (2001). As a white woman, the author struggles with her love for dancehall music but also the issue of cultural appropriation relating to the physical space.

¹²Noble (2000) and J.T. Springer (2007) address similar issues in calypso.

¹³See Davis (1998).

¹⁴G. Smitherman (1997) defines call-and-response as a "spontaneous verbal and non-verbal interaction between speaker and listener in which all statements (call) are punctuated by expressions ("responses") from the listener.

¹⁵See for example, J.L. Shulman and S.G. Horne (2003), "The Use of Self-Pleasure: Masturbation and Body Image among African American and European American Women", *Psychology of Women Quarterly*, 27:3, pp. 262-269; E. Laumann and J. Mahay, (2002), "The Social Organization of Women's Health." In G.M. Wingwood and R.J. DiClemente (Eds.), *Handbook of women's sexual and reproductive health*. New York: Kluwer Academic/Plenum Publishers.

¹⁶

¹⁷See also Gangsta Blue (2004) and Rebelution (2006) VP Records. I had a chance to meet Tanya Stephens in Toronto in 2006; she was not only down-to-earth and generous with her time, but incredibly intelligent and sophisticated.

¹⁸A dance often done to dancehall or Calypso music where people move their hips front to back and side to side.

¹⁹ With respect to Toronto, see for example, E, Tharao, N. Massaquoi and S. Teclom. 2004. *Silent voices of the AIDS epidemic: African and Caribbean women, their understanding of the various dimensions of HIV/AIDS, and factors that contribute to their silence*. Toronto: Women's Health in Women's Hands.

References

- Ali, A., N. Massaquoi and M. Brown. 2003. *Racism as a determinant of health: The impact of racism on the health of young women of color*. Toronto: Women's Health in Women's Hands.
- Bowman, C. 2014. Women's masturbation: Experiences of sexual empowerment in a primarily sex-positive sample. *Psychology of Women Quarterly*, Vol.38, No.3, pp.363-37.
- Brown, J. 1999. Masculinity and dancehall. *Caribbean Quarterly*, Vol.45, pp.11-16.
- Cooper, C. 2000. Lady Saw cuts loose: Female fertility rituals in Jamaican dancehall culture. Proceedings of the Dancing in the Millennium Conference, Washington, DC. Accessed 24 September 2010. <http://www.jouvay.com/interviews/carolyncooper.htm>.
- . 2004. *Sound clash: Jamaican dancehall: From Lady Saw to Dancehall Queen*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- . 1995. *Noises in the blood: Orality, gender, and the "vulgar body" of Jamaican popular culture*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Davis, Angela Y. 1998. *Blues legacies and black feminism: Gertude "Ma" Rainey, Bessie Smith, and Billie Holiday*. New York: Pantheon Books.
- Flynn, K. 2014. Black Canadian Feminist Theorizing: Possibilities and Prospects. *CLR James Journal*, Vol 20: 1 & 2, pp. 179-193.
- Flynn, K. and E. Marrast. 2008. Spoken word from the north: Contesting nation, politics and identity. *Wadabagei: A Journal of the Caribbean and Its Diasporas*, Vol.11, No. 2, pp. 3-24.
- Flynn, K. and A. Taylor. 2009. We must do whatever it takes: Promoting and sustaining Black Canadian women's health in Toronto. In *Strong women, dangerous times: Gender and HIV/AIDS in Africa*, ed. E. Kalipeni, K. Flynn, and C. Pope, 253-270. New York: Nova Science Publisher.
- Ford-Smith, H. 2011. Local and transnational dialogues on memory and violence in Jamaica and Toronto: Staging letters from the dead among the living. *Canadian Theatre Review*, Vol. 148, pp.10-17.
- Gilroy, P. 1992. *There ain't no Black in the Union Jack: The cultural politics of race and nation*. London: Routledge.
- Gotfrit, L. 1991. Women dancing back: Disruption and the politics of pleasure. In *Post modernism, feminism, and cultural politics: Redrawing educational boundaries*, ed.H.A. Giroux, 175-195. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.
- Hope, D.P. 2006. *Inna di dancehall: Popular culture and the politics of identity in Jamaica*. Kingston, Jamaica: The University of the West Indies Press.
- Kempadoo, K. 2009. Caribbean sexuality: Mapping the field. *Caribbean Review of Gender Studies*, Issue 3, pp.1-20.

- Kalinowsky, L.N. 2001. White on black femme-insist queerless. *Canadian Women's Studies*, Vol.21, No.4, pp.101-105.
- Laumann, E. and J. Mahay. 2002. The social organization of women's health. In *Handbook of women's sexual and reproductive health*, ed. G.M. Wingwood and R.J. DiClemente, 43-70. New York: Kluwer Academic/Plenum Publishers.
- Lawson, E. 2013. Precautionary measures: Caribbean-Canadian mothers, daughters, and sex education. In *Feminist and critical perspectives on Caribbean mothering*, ed. D.S. Silva and S.A. James Alexander, 111-128. New Jersey: Africa World Press.
- Lady Saw. 1998. *Raw: The best of Lady Saw*. Kingston: VP Records.
- Lewis, L. 2005. Unsettling masculinity in the Caribbean: Facing a future without guarantees. *Working Paper Series* (No. 13). Cave Hill, Barbados: The University of the West Indies, Centre for Gender and Development Studies.
- . 2004. Caribbean masculinity at the fin de siècle. In *Interrogating Caribbean masculinities: Theoretical and empirical analyses*, ed. R.E. Reddock, 244-266. Kingston, Jamaica: The University of the West Indies Press.
- Manuel, P. 1998. Gender politics in Caribbean popular music: Consumer perspectives and academic interpretation. *Popular Music and Society*, Vol.22, pp.1-13. Accessed 19 October 2005. <http://www.questia.com/PM.qst?a=o&d=5001409805>.
- Massaquoi, N. and N. N. Wane, eds. 2007. *Theorizing empowerment: Canadian perspectives on Black feminist thought*. Toronto: Inanna Publications and Education.
- Mohammed, P., ed. 2002. *Gendered realities: Essays in Caribbean feminist thought*. Kingston, Jamaica: The University of the West Indies Press.
- Noble, D. 2000. Raggamusic: Dis/respecting Black women and dis/reputable sexualities. In *Unsettled multiculturalisms: Diasporas, entanglements, transruptions*, ed. Barnor Hesse, 148-169. New York: Zed Books.
- Nurse, K. 2004. Masculinities in transition: Gender and the global problematique. *Interrogating Caribbean masculinities: Theoretical and empirical analyses*, ed. R.E. Reddock, 3-37. Kingston, Jamaica: The University of the West Indies Press.
- Saunders, P.J. 2003. It's not everything good to eat, good to talk: Sexual economy and dancehall music in Jamaica. *Small Axe: A Caribbean Journal of Criticism*, Vol.7, No.1 pp.95-115.
- Shulman, J.L, and S.G. Horne. 2003. The use of self-pleasure: Masturbation and body image among African American and European American Women. *Psychology of Women Quarterly*, Vol.27, No.3, pp.262-269.
- Smitherman, G. 1997. *Talkin and testifying: The language of Black America*. Detroit: Wayne State University Press.
- Spillers, H. J. 1989. Interstices: A small drama of words. In *Pleasure and danger: Exploring female sexuality*, ed. Carol Vance, 73-100. London: Pandora Press.
- Springer, J.T. 2007. 'Roll it gal': Alison Hinds, female empowerment, and calypso. *Meridians: Feminism, race, transnationalism*, Vol.8, No.1, pp.93-129.

- Stanley, S.N. 2005. Dis slackness ting: A review of dichotomizing narratives in Jamaican dancehall. *Caribbean Quarterly*, Vol.51, No.3/4, pp.55-76.
- Stephens, T. 1997. *Too hype*. Kingston: VP Records.
- Sterling, M. D. 2012. Raggamuffin inna Tokyo City: Representing gender, class and race in Japanese dancehall culture. In *Global Reggae*, ed. C. Cooper, Kingston, Jamaica: The University of the West Indies Press.
- . 2010. *Babylon East: Performing dancehall, roots reggae and Rastafari in Japan*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- . 2006. The symbolic constitution of Japanese dancehall. *Social and Economic Studies*, Vol. 55, No.1&2, pp.1-24.
- Stolzoff, N. C. 2000. *Wake the town and tell the people: Dancehall culture in Jamaica*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Tomlinson, L. 2012. The Black diaspora north of the border: Women, music and Caribbean culture in Toronto. In *Archipelagos of sound: Transnational Caribbeanities: Women and music*, ed. Ifeona Fulani, 219-235. Kingston, Jamaica: The University of the West Indies Press.
- Walker, K. 2012. The journey of reggae in Canada. In *Global Reggae*, ed. C. Cooper, 187-213, Kingston, Jamaica: The University of the West Indies Press.
- Webster, P. 1989. The forbidden: Eroticism and taboo. In *Pleasure and danger: Exploring female sexuality*, ed. Carol Vance, 385-398. London: Pandora Press.
- Wyatt, G. E. 1997. *Stolen women: Reclaiming our sexuality, taking back our lives*. New York: Wiley.



<http://sta.uwi.edu/crgs/index.asp>