

# White on Black FemME—inISt quEErles

by Leita N. Kalinowsky

My participation in this cultural space is terribly uneasy as I am torn between concerns surrounding an appropriation of a cultural space that is not my own and the desire to give voice to similarities that transcend traditional divisions of difference.

*Dans les débats actuels sur les groupes ethniques, la culture générale perpétue la notion que le plaisir est dans la différence. Cette auteure, jeune femme-iniste, blanche, lesbienne explore ce qu'elle ressent quand elle fréquente des salles de danse où la clientèle est différente de ce qu'elle est. Elle croit que cette stratégie pourra créer des rapprochements avec des groupes ethniques différents et combler les disparités sexuelles.*

DanceHall /'dan (t) s, 'h o l / n [Jamaican Rastafariansim] 1a: a modern version of reggae. Overlaps in sound with hip-hop. Utilizes sampling, drum machines. b: the site in Jamaica where DanceHall music is played.

—Spitz of "Mood Ruff"

Within current debates about race and difference, mass culture is the contemporary location that both publicly declares

and perpetuates the idea that there is pleasure to be found in the acknowledgement and enjoyment of racial difference. The commodification of Otherness has been so successful because it is offered as a new delight, more intense, more satisfying than normal ways of doing and feeling. Within commodity culture ethnicity becomes the spice, seasoning that will liven up the dull dish that is mainstream white culture.

—bell hooks (1992a:29)

What is involved in the project of rescinding borders is a critical awareness of how borders have been (and continue to be) systematically policed and for whose ideological benefit and material profit. The way to rescind borders is of course to cross them and, in doing so, blur them, confuse them, make them permeable, open for traffic in all directions, and, as a result, realize they have in fact been open all along, crossed by illegal traffic of all kinds—in short, that differences of the kind that do not settle down into binaries have already proliferated in our own

—Vera Kutzinski "American Literary History as Spatial Practice" (1992:553)

Come on baby, light my fire/  
everything you drop is so tired/  
Music is supposed to inspire/  
How come we ain't getting no higher?

—Lauren Hill *The Miseducation of Lauren Hill*

## My First DanceHall Date

Outside I can hear the music feel the music rise up from the ground and vibrate in my blood. I stand a moment, conscious of nothing but the warm beat. My friend and I enter the DanceHall; then I become conscious of my whiteness, aware that I am one of very few white people in this space.

Most of the clubs I have attended which play DanceHall music offer a couple of sets per night. There, I have waited patiently through sets of hip-hop and rap for my one true love—the DanceHall beat. But this is a Jamaican social<sup>1</sup> where all the music that I love is played non-stop. It's like a deluxe sensory explosion. A circle of bodies wine<sup>2</sup> to the music—there is no dance floor here, everyone is dancing, swaying, movin', grindin', jumpin' to the beat.

The DJ works on anticipation, like a skilled lover, offering a sample of something, then taking it away and mixing it back in. The crowd anticipates the beat of a song they love, the voice of a singer speaking a political verse or an empowering phrase, bragging about his/her talents, or tossing a jeer or a joke. These are sampled in and out, mixed over and under other voices and beats. You wait, and you're completely entertained until the DJ hits you with the latest track, and the guns explode, and the people in the circle thrust their fists in the air and raise their hands to the roof—the party's jumpin', the wining has begun!

In Jamaica, the DanceHall is the place, the site where you go to hear DanceHall music. In an urban Winnipeg setting, the DanceHall hap-

# abOuT daNCeHaLL

pens at Jamaican socials like I've just described. The Jamaican social is somewhat of an underground phenomenon—a community party. Unless you're invited you wouldn't know the time, date, or location of the event. Invitations are dispersed by word-of-mouth, or by use of flyers distributed at hip-hop clubs. Attendance is predominantly Caribbean/West Indian. Though it is certainly possible to locate and attend an event on my own, or with non-Caribbean friend, I attend these DanceHall events, known in Winnipeg as "socials," *only* when I am *invited*.

My participation in this cultural space is terribly uneasy as I am torn between concerns surrounding an appropriation of a cultural space that is not my own and the desire to give voice to and problematize similarities that transcend traditional divisions of difference such as race, gender and sexuality. This paper begins to navigate some of my guilty feelings and tensions around loving and participating in the DanceHall scene.

## Confessions of a DanceHall Junkie

In this paper, I explore what seems a contradictory experience: my comfort in the DanceHall (a predominantly black, heterosexual space) and how this music has affirmed yet complicated my social analysis as a white queer femme-inist.<sup>3</sup> I focus here on my own "reading" practices, and my own pleasures, not presuming to know how welcome I am. Part of my "guilt" is that I go anyway and so here I explore my subjective investment in the cultural site of the DanceHall. I

will mobilize imagination as a strategy for prompting coalition across the borders of racial, gender, and sexual differences: in short, to argue first, that we might disrupt identity borders by crossing them, and second, that in our crossing we might deconstruct traditional notions of difference which separate us.

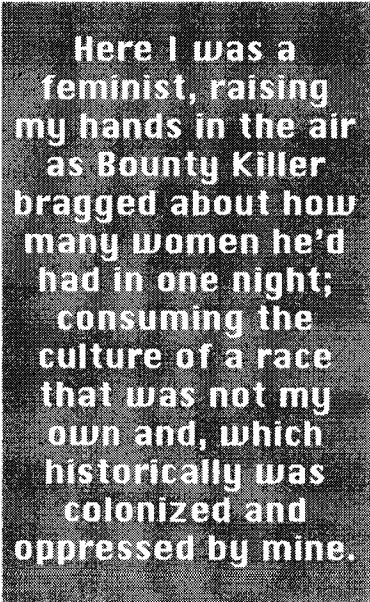
Feminist theory and the DanceHall beat both hit me around the same time and have continued to engage my passion and challenge my assumptions. In women's studies I found a language to account for all the omissions of my experiences as a woman growing up in a patriarchal society. And in DanceHall lyrics ... well, initially the DanceHall was a guilty pleasure I couldn't easily account for. Here I was a feminist, raising my hands in the air as Bounty Killer bragged about how many women he'd had in one night; consuming the culture of a race that was not my own and, which historically was colonized and oppressed by mine; as well as feeling aroused by the same heterogender stereotypes I fought to disrupt in my day life.

## The Gender Guilt

While I was being schooled by day in the evils of mass culture and its commodification and objectification of women's bodies, I was sneaking off in the middle of the night to get my fix of DanceHall beats. I couldn't resist dancing to the beat of Bounty Killer singing: "gyal dem hav de face and dem hav de figure/remind me of the Benz and the Lexus and the Beemer/to hav this girl would be my pleasure she's so precious like the gold ina mi treasure" (1996). The

comparison of women's bodies to expensive cars and gold was too similar to the sexist advertisements in mainstream magazines that I had long since forgone. Sharp gender divisions are common in the lyrics; yet I took pleasure in how up front and unapologetic these performers were in making sexist remarks about women and men. It was a certain release that the overt and covert marginalization of women that I took so seriously in women's studies could be mocked and used as a source of entertainment. This got me thinking about the many ways of reading and interpreting cultural productions—could my feminist politics coalesce with my love of DanceHall?

Part of my contradictory relationship with the lyrics was due to their portrayal of women as sexual objects. This is not to say women's bodies are the sole focus of the lyrics. Much attention is paid to issues of racism, poverty, crime, history and



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politics, to name a few, and to assuage my gender guilt these were the songs I would focus on. Also, DanceHall performance is not the exclusive domain of men: they too are occasionally on the receiving end of sexual taunts. Bold female performers use wit and humour to turn the othering look back on men and

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to challenge oppressive gendered expectations of sexual behaviour. In "Darnest Things," Lady Saw counsels women to maintain their integrity and pride in themselves in the face of female objectification:

Men say the darnest things when they wanna ride your rhythm/  
but remember a lady you are—  
dash wa yo pride fi no boogie  
yagga bwoy/men will preach like  
John Paul when they wanna tear  
down your wall/when you fall in  
love and they get the chance/  
them walk away without even a  
phone call. (1996)

Lady Saw reminds women to voice their concerns and needs in intimate relationships. In the song "Good Wuk," she takes a sexually independent stance, challenging men to a variety of sexual positions in order to see if they meet her requirements. Her explicit, rough style is a step

toward empowering women's agency around sexuality. Further her reverse-sexism parodies male sexism, providing a critical and amusing look at traditional gender roles. Also, it is important to note that a constant debate occurs between the female and male performers. But who's kidding who? I toss up my hands and jump just as high when Shabba Ranks tells me my job is to make a comfortable home for my man. Since when do we believe everything we hear? I think to myself: little does he know the feminist possibilities groovin' around this floor and I smirk subversively.

And why not, I say? While my body is being lured by the beat, my feminist brain doesn't go on vacation. I realize women's bodies are frequently the topic of male lyricists, which may lead you to assume they have little respect for our sexy gray matter. Careful where you trod in those nasty gender generalizations; the same reductive assumptions that hold us back as women, keep men from challenging oppressive gender stereotypes—in turn denying us all the freedom to express a range of gendered characteristics. Besides, after a long day of feminist theorizing my body needs some active attention. So, I question the healthfulness of censoring pleasure and molding oneself according to "clubhouse rules." Like Lady Saw's lyrics suggest, women can and do enjoy a variety of different things and we shouldn't have to measure our desire against a singular feminist ideal: we've come a long way baby—and we negotiate amongst our feminisms.

### **Race Guilt**

After reading Eric Lott's "Racial Cross-Dressing and the Construction of American Whiteness," I returned to my somewhat resolved relationship with the DanceHall in order to explore some of the race guilt this article provoked in me.

Lott traces examples of racial cross-dressing in post-World War II texts

such as *Black Like Me*, and in the earlier blackface theatre tradition in the United States, to support his assertion that whiteness could not exist without an internalization of the racial Other against which it is constructed. Since privilege in western rationalist society has been dependent on a degradation of the body and an emphasis on the mind, Others (be they women, black and or the working class) have generally been portrayed as excessive in their enjoyment of the body while the white, male, self is cerebral. Lott argues, "it is the 'other' who is always putatively 'excessive' in the body, whether through exotic food, strange and noisy music, outlandish bodily exhibitions, or unremitting sexual appetite" (248). And so the argument goes: being all mind isn't fun, so whites have organized their own enjoyment through the "other."

Was I like the blackface performers, dependent upon the DanceHall to maintain my own whiteness? Was I appropriating this cultural site as a means of expressing some "excess" of body that was denied to me as a white woman? For myself, the rigors of an Honour's course load, a part-time job, and community work were what stood in the way of releasing some tension. The thesis and the articles to read kept me from remembering I had a body—not my whiteness. However, Lott's analysis challenged me to consider that I choose a predominantly black cultural site to piece my body and brain back together.

Why the need to find a bridge to bring mind and body, back together? The disembodiment of our world and our ideas has resulted in hierarchies of power and privilege; simultaneously this ordering of reality has objectified truth and experience. If objectified truth is the accurate picture of reality, then emotion, passion, desire, and the body get relegated to the realm of irrationality, as do the "others" associated with the body (be they women, black and or the working class). But it is not the relegation of "others" to the realm of irrationality, and therefore

by implication their devaluation, that Lott emphasizes in his analysis of the blackface tradition. In his argument the elite internalize the marginalized "other," through blackface, in order to project a natural order and legitimize dominance. It is the white male Emperor parading around as if he did not have a body, or a race or a gender and his need to imitate an oppressed group in order to "obtain" a body that concerns me here (Peeples).

As a white woman, I am already aligned with irrationality and the body, granted to a lesser extent than women of colour and or poor women. Success is measured by my ability to reject/conceal my body and emphasize the rational. My location causes me to be more concerned about merging the two binaries, than obtaining one previously denounced (i.e., as white men have denounced the body and seek access to the corporeal through the "other").

As I worked through Lott's analysis, I realized the feminist pedagogical practices which seek to heal this rationalist split are not unlike the culture of DanceHall; both celebrate the body, both blend the rational and the irrational, and both are politically engaged environments. These factors draw me to them both. In a feminist classroom we learn to begin from what we know, to validate and question experience as well as the quantifiable. The unruliness and contradictory nature of bodies comes to play in a way that has often been discouraged by traditional academic disciplines which emphasize objectivity.

Similarly the DanceHall does not create a hierarchy of objective over subjective. Rather, the complexity of lived experience is reflected by the entertaining component of jests and jokes alongside the documentation of an underrepresented and marginalized history of black peoples; and a critical analyses of class inequality in a global political economy.

Emotions run high when "truth" is dissolved of its power and multi-

plicity of voice is fostered. In women's studies there are no "correct" answers, there is no one voice, and no knowledge claims purporting universality. The professor facilitates and moderates a cacophony of voices, the students, her own, and an array of critical theorists, just as the DanceHall DJ cultivates a dialogue, through mixing techniques, amongst performers of dissenting and contradictory views. It isn't surprising that differently marginalized groups might share some similarity in their counter-(mainstream) cultural techniques for survival. But before I could wrest my love of DanceHall from a white privileged ability to make contact with the racialized "other," I turned to bell hooks for some feminist insights.

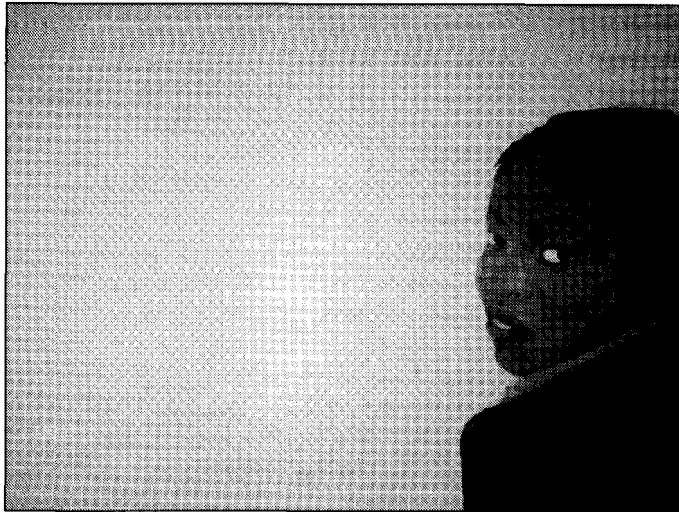
In "Eating the Other: Desire and Resistance," hooks argues that white culture's encounters with difference maintain and reproduce unequal relations between whites and blacks. hooks challenges white people to consider not only their desire to make contact with the Other but also their inherent belief that making contact disrupts the will to dominate. It is not only contact with the absence of a will to dominate but also a recognition of past historical accountability, and the awareness that whiteness cannot continue to decide the nature of its relationship to blackness, which has been largely lacking in personal interaction between black and white peoples.

I am certain I do not relinquish my ability to decide my relationship to blackness; I do step into a cultural site that is integral to the political empowerment of a community to which I do not belong. However, I do not approach the DanceHall in denial about the privilege my whiteness accords me outside that space. And, in some sense I leave that privilege at the door, because it does not purchase my entry—I go only if invited—nor does it guarantee acceptance—transparency may. On the other hand, I recognize I bring with me all the experience my white privilege has bought me in the western

world. My desire to seek contact itself does not absolve me of my place in a history of inequitable relations between white and black peoples.

Studying the contributions of women of colour to feminist theorizing has encouraged me to reflect on the racial privilege I have in my daily interactions with persons of authority. My participation in a space where I am a racial minority causes me to act: it demands that I act on this reflection. For example, I have learned to reflect the diversity of black looks in my descriptions because "um ... he's black....," just doesn't do in a room full of black people. I try to practice this specificity, which I took for granted in my descriptions of white people (she's blond, short) when I am in the racial majority as a white person, as well as when the context of the situation (black majority) necessitates it. And though this strategic inclusion or removal of racialized descriptors does not constitute accountability, it is a step towards refusing to allow an absence of pigment to equal an absence of race; that is we are all people of colour, certain colours are privileged differently. Much work still needs to be done around the issue of whiteness as a race. The DanceHall like a

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Xochitl Isla-Rubio, *Untitled*, 20" x 28", Oil on Canvas, 2001.

feminist classroom, is a place where I must actively engage with my preconceptions about race and gender.

### Queering the DanceHall/Sexual Identity Guilt

I am in absolute agreement with hooks' assessment of white supremacy and cultural imperialism as they relate to contemporary popular culture and its appropriation and commodification of black culture. However, I'll suggest my participation in the DanceHall is not "a desire for 'a bit of the Other' to enhance the blank landscape of my whiteness" (1992a:29). Rather, that my subjective investment in DanceHall queeries its (narrow) assignment as an(Other) site of blackness.

In order to put forth my investment in DanceHall as a white, queer, femme-inist it is necessary for me to call into question the roots of identity politics, which I argue, as does Bert Archer, are to be found in a fundamental mistrust of the human imagination (29). At first dropping racial/gender/sexual gender identities from our collective psychic wardrobe might seem like a big complicated thing. Identity criteria represent a way of distinguishing ourselves from other people and this strategy has been essential if not foundational to all liberation movements.

Theorists such as Stuart Hall have

considered what the world might look like if it were not racially segregated. And curiously, his pondering led him to assert, in "Race: the floating signifier," that an automatic celebration of a particular race or degradation share: a fundamental attachment to ascribed racial meaning; they simply value the difference differently.

In *The End of Gay*,

Archer argues identity designations, by omission rather than commission, make us less happy and more anxious people. I would add more importantly, identity designations are what keep us from seeing oppressions as linked and their reproduction dependent upon the separation of differently marginalized groups and peoples. Might the performers and participants of the DanceHall exist in locations in addition to race? Of course they do, as do we all. James Baldwin said just before he died: "There's nothing in me that is not in everyone else, and nothing in everyone else which is not in me" (qtd. in Archer 28). This is not to posit identitylessness, or generalism as the utopic character of emancipated peoples. It is rather, to suggest that equality will come to fruition only when value-laden differences are removed and we recognize common experience crosses traditional divisions of difference. I believe that if we imagine the kind of world we would like to live in, and behave as if that world already exists, we will live ourselves right into that space. Social change and imagination share a common project:

The production of "images of that which is not yet" that provoke people to consider, and inform them in considering, what would have to be done for

things to be otherwise. (Simon 9)

### Femme-inity

A celebration of the unique style of women can be read a number of different ways; initially I heard this as sexism and objectification. Since, I have preferred to take my presence in the DanceHall as the starting point for activism. Whether anyone knows it or not, I do not leave my feminism or my queerness at the door when I enter, and necessarily these affect my reading of the performers, the site and the lyrics.

Feminism has often discouraged, or at least rarely celebrated, Euro-North American ideas of femininity. Some feminists suggest the pursuit of beauty and heteronormative standards of gender keep women in their domestic place. Resistance, in that view comes in the form of rejecting fashion and commodification. I have felt pressure to conform to a "birkenstock" ideal, first as feminist, then as a queer woman. At the DanceHall, male and female performers celebrate the unique style of a feminine woman. Here "feminine," "strong," and "sexy" stand side by side as descriptors in a way that reflects my lifestyle choices. I find a space to insert myself into the lyrics, as a queer woman, in shared appreciation and celebration of women. And I derive confidence from the male performers' appreciation of a unique feminine style, and the female performers' strength and aggressive sass.

Standards of beauty are important to self-perception and self-confidence. It may seem like a contradictory location for me to seek out reflections of my body in a predominantly black space, particularly because black women have often been neglected or fetishized in mainstream fashion and beauty culture. bell hooks discusses contemporary thinking about black female bodies in: "Selling Hot Pussy." She draws attention to characteristics of the black female body, such as a prominent butt, and how they have

been read and reproduced as signs of natural racial inferiority. hooks gives the example of the popular song, "Doin' the Butt," which was featured in Spike Lee's film *School Daze*. The hot dance, which promoted the song, favoured those who could protrude their buttocks with glee and pride (1992b 63). The same is true for wining, the sexualized dance styles in reggae, and the lyrics reflect that; here a voluptuous body is a sexy body. I have a subjective investment in DanceHall as a woman who often feels my body is drawn outside of conventional skinny standards. There, my exaggerated hips and thighs feel at home wining to the DanceHall beat. This is a space where I feel comfortable in, and proud of, my body.

In this predominantly black space I feel the music more accurately reflects my queer feminist negotiations with femininity and sexual desire. Just as I am shocked by the gender stereotypes in the music, I am excited by them. I am thrilled by the array of feminine and masculine qualities they lay out and I find places to insert myself on both sides of the gender coin.

Perhaps there is something to cultivate in cross-identifications that blur and confuse enforced borders. We might want to consider that more is happening in the DanceHall than a West Indian cultural celebration. As human beings we share experiences, qualities, comfort levels, and spaces with others for a number of reasons which defy traditional divisions of difference. The current enthusiasm for queer politics, coalition and recognition of similarity within difference, is a rejection of obsolete, rigid identity designations in favor of an innate interconnectedness among marginalized and oppressed peoples.

Might we then consider imagination and border crossing as strategies for social change? It is the crossing of borders that helps us understand their construction. By crossing borders we blur them and dissolve their power to separate us from one another's voices. In crossing over we open up a space

where we can learn, acknowledge, and challenge the history, power and privilege, which separated us in the first place. In crossing over into the Dance-Hall I have gained a better understanding of myself to recognize shared experience in unlikely and some might argue "unfeminist" activities. By contesting the notion of normal divisions between white and black, women and men, straight and queer I hope to eradicate the idea of "normal" and the power that goes along with belonging to normal culture.

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<sup>1</sup>Socials are distinct to the Prairie region. Essentially they are parties held to raise money. They include, but are not limited to: wedding socials, various sports club related socials, fundraisers for local services such as police, fire stations, and community centre.

<sup>2</sup>wine:/ v. 1a. sexualized dance styles in reggae and dancehall music. Also referred to as rubadub and grinding

<sup>3</sup>femme-inist:/ adj. 1a. politic and practice firmly grounded in feminist and queer philosophy. b. embraces and encourages the full participation of all peoples as feminist actors in the emancipation of women. c. views all oppressions as linked and their eradication as human responsibility. d. celebrates traditional femininity, rejecting any and all notions of heterosexual "passing" and co-optation by the oppressors.

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