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Free bodies, segmented selves: Paradoxical spaces of dancehall culture in Singapore

Orlando Woods

Abstract

This paper contributes to the ongoing expansion of the geographies of encounter by considering how cultural encounters can lead to the realisation, and the segmentation, of the self. As much as cultural differences can be manifested, negotiated and managed externally, so too can these differences be internal states that are realised through engagements with the embodied self. Accordingly, segmented selves are an outcome of the desire for individuals to compartmentalise diverse and disaggregated lives, and to retain a sense of cohesion and harmony within the various socio-cultural communities to which they belong. I bring these ideas to life through an empirical exploration of the practice of dancehall in Singapore. Whereas dancehall is known for its hyper-sexualised representation of the gendered body, Singapore is a conservative country in which the self remains a relatively prescribed construct that is often defined in relation to the ethno-religious community to which an individual belongs. Dancehall provides a performative channel through which young Singaporeans can realise the gendered and sexual freedoms of the embodied self. These embodied freedoms must, however, be negotiated within the broader context of community conservatism, which leads to the embodiment of difference, and the formation of paradoxical spaces and segmented selves.

Keywords: Dancehall, encounter, segmented selves, Singapore, paradoxical spaces

Introduction

Cultural practice provides a medium through which the self can be realised, challenged and transformed. It offers ideas, methods and validation, yet so too can it be the basis of difference and division. Encountering different forms of cultural practice can offer new opportunities for self-realisation, but it can also create tension and conflict with the socio-cultural communities to which an individual belongs. As a result, 'difference is not fixed but rather emerges from encounters... encounters are about more than the coming together of different bodies. Encounters *make* difference' (Ahmed 2000; Wilson 2017, 455, original emphasis). To the extent that encounters in/with space can lead to the (re)configuration of difference (Mahtani 2014), so too does the space of the body provide a uniquely personal and emancipatory channel through which

individuals can pursue freedom from externally defined prescriptions. The body has the potential to be a 'vector of change' (Grosz 2005) that, when freed from such prescriptions, can enable new ways of being, and new methods of becoming. In this view, the self can be realised through the body as much as it can the mind, consciousness, or the inscriptions of society and culture (after Grosz 1994; Slocum 2008; Woods 2019). With these ideas in mind, this paper explores how dance can 'articulate the authentic expressions of the body' (Wolff 1995, 80), and how these expressions can, in turn, result in embodied encounters with different articulations of the self. Moving beyond the study of inter-personal encounters (i.e. between self and other), it explores some of the effects of *intra*-personal encounters (i.e. within the self) instead. This expansion is a response to Wilson's (2017, 451) recent lament that encounter remains 'under-theorized', despite being a 'conceptually charged construct that is worthy of sustained and critical attention'. Specifically, I argue that embodied encounters can foreground the pluralisation of the self, which in turn can lead to 'segmented selves'.

Segmented selves are an outcome of encounters with different cultural practices. They reflect the ways in which individuals negotiate and manage the plurality of the self in a world of cultural diversity, splintering and complexity. As such, they are an outcome of the desire for individuals to compartmentalise disaggregated socio-cultural lives, and to retain a sense of cohesion and harmony within the various communities to which they belong. To segment the self is to establish the potential for new forms of becoming. As such, the self can be defined as both the inward reflection and outward manifestation of who we are, and, importantly, who we want to *become*. Whilst the embodied self often emerges in fleeting, contradictory and sometimes uncomfortable ways to begin with, over time these embodied encounters have the potential to shape and mould the outward (re)presentation of the self to society. Yet, whilst segmenting the self can be seen as the beginnings of emancipation from the prescriptions of others, many individuals face various social, cognitive and emotional barriers to fully integrating the different segments of themselves into one cohesive whole. Thus, whilst the body is a channel through which freedoms can be embraced and the self can be realised, the fact remains that individuals must constantly negotiate these freedoms in relation to the prescriptions of the socio-cultural communities to which they belong. I bring these ideas to life through an empirical exploration of the practice of dancehall in Singapore.

Dancehall emerged in the ghettos of Kingston, Jamaica in the late-1970s. It has since come to represent a distinct style of music, dance, fashion and attitude that enables individuals to 'asser[t] a new sense of self, a sense of freedom' (Stanley-Niaah 2009, 759). Importantly, dancehall is expressed through hyper-gendered, and hyper-sexualised, representations of the dancers' body. Singapore, on the other hand, is a conservative Asian country in which the self remains a relatively prescribed construct that is often defined in relation to the ethno-religious community to which an individual belongs. Whilst these communities endure, young Singaporeans are increasingly seeking to realise

new forms of embodied freedom, with dancehall providing its practitioners with a 'startling insight into who it is they actually are – that is to say, a *truly plural being or figure*' (Ness 1992, 5, emphasis added). This plurality of being underpins my conceptualisation of the segmented self; a self that is non-binary, and reflects the messy complexities, contradictions and compromises of everyday life (after Bell 1995; Desbiens 1999; Mahtani 2001). As the self segments, it intersects with multiple, overlapping, and sometimes conflicting spatial registers. Accordingly, I draw on Rose's (1993) notion of 'paradoxical space' to consider the ways in which people can simultaneously be located in multiple spaces. Often, this multi-locationality creates 'radically heterogeneous geometries' (Rose 1993, 140) that are underpinned by paradox and subversion. For the purposes of this paper, 'paradoxical spaces' refers to the simultaneity of freedom and constraint that comes with practising dancehall in Singapore. The embodiment of dancehall culture in Singapore can therefore challenge pre-existing understandings of the racial, religious or sexual body; it offers a more cosmopolitan understanding of the Singaporean body that is rooted in an ontology of movement and expression.

This paper comprises three sections. The first explores existing understandings of cultural encounter and the negotiation of difference. The second introduces dancehall culture, and highlights its embodied appeal. The third is empirical, and explores the paradoxical spaces of dancehall culture in Singapore. It considers the ways in which embodied forms of freedom are realised, how new understandings of the gendered and sexual self are negotiated, and how, in turn, the freedom of the body results in the segmentation of the self.

Embodying the self in a world of cultural multiplicity

The ways in which difference is understood and negotiated has captured the attention of scholars for a long time now. The resultant corpus of work has tended to 'focus on discourses that depict clear distinctions of social identity and categorization' (Peterson 2017; Valentine and Waite 2012; Wilson 2017, 454), and has explored in particular how interpersonal encounters can lead to the formation, negotiation and contestation of the categories of 'self' and 'other'. Notwithstanding the importance of this scholarship, there is a need to consider the lines of internal rupture and distinction that individuals must negotiate when they encounter and adopt different, culturally informed, representations of the self. These encounters can lead to a splintering and dilution of the *socio-cultural* self – that is, the cultural self as defined through outward inscriptions of ethnicity, gender, religion, language and so on – and can help to realise the plurality of cultural 'selves' that are embodied and negotiated throughout daily life. The idea of cultural multiplicity builds on the premise that we are all located at the intersection of diverse webs of cultural influence. Many of these influences we inherit from our parents, friends and the broader socio-cultural environments in which we are embedded; others we acquire through the realisation of our own interests, choices and desires. Amongst young people in

particular, cultural differences are often embraced, explored and understood through the lens of *popular* culture. Yet, as Harris (2009, 194) laments:

It is in the world of popular consumer culture, as well as in the everyday encounters facilitated by the mundane realities of eating, dressing and recreating, that young people do most of their production and contestation of difference. Typically, popular and everyday culture has been regarded as trivialising multiculturalism and providing only weak forms of cosmopolitanism. For example, attention to culturally-specific food, dance, popular media and clothing is frequently pilloried as the most banal or vacuous form of multiculturalism.

Interpreting popular culture as 'the most banal or vacuous form of multiculturalism' reveals some of the biases and prejudices upon which existing discourses of cultural representation are based. Popular culture intersects with, and can help to shape and define, how multiculturalism is negotiated through everyday encounters with the self[f/ves], and with others. Defining cultural multiplicity in this way can contribute to new understandings of how difference is negotiated; negotiations that are often rooted in a 'radical openness to the *simultaneity* of difference and similarity' (Askins 2015, 473, emphasis added). This vision of 'radical openness' often exists in a state of tension with the fact that young people often remain 'subjects to be molded into appropriate citizens within a pre-systematised ethnic hierarchy' (Harris 2009, 189). Such 'molding' is prevalent in Asia, where ethno-religious 'hierarch[ies]' remain the dominant structuring forces of society, and provide cultural frameworks against which normative standards of attitude and behaviour are defined. In other words, these norms and expectations provide a prescriptive framework by which definitions and behaviours of the self are judged to be acceptable or not.

Negotiating situations of cultural multiplicity can reveal the ways in which the self is implicated in, and responds to, the tension between identity and belonging. Such tension is rooted in the body, as the body provides both the external manifestation of, and internal contestation of, sameness and difference. The body, then, is 'not so much a space of resistance as an entirely different geometry through which we can think power, knowledge, space and identity in critical, and hopefully, liberatory ways' (Rose 1993, 159). Responding to these ideas, scholars have explored the ways in which categories of difference are in fact malleable, and contingent, constructs. These explorations provide an important counterpoint to deterministic understandings of the body, which tend to be 'reduced to a solely corporeal identity based on the colour of their skin, reflecting an almost obsessive focus on phenotype and flesh' (Mahtani 2014, 362). They also counterpose the view that bodies are constructed in relation to socio-cultural norms, with Saldanha (2010, 2410) arguing that bodies can 'create circumstances' through which the self can be realised. The body, then, plays a performative role in the construction of the self. Through movement, expression and self-representation, the body has

been conceptualised as a 'machinic assemblage' (Saldanha 2006, 2012) that is multiple in its becomings. As Slocum (2008, 853) explains:

Bodies become through what they do, the relations of which they are a part and the formations in which they act. Corporeality, then, refers to a dynamic capacity of human bodies to emerge in relation to each other and to things, within social and physical limits.

Encountering the embodied self can cause the tensions embedded within such 'limits' to manifest. These encounters can, in other words, reveal the 'contingent nature of identity, belonging and power' and the ways in which 'societal attitudes, discourses and categorizations shape and constrain them' (Wilson 2017, 455). Encounters lead to differences being internalised, suppressed, manifested or overcome. They can also, however, cause the self to become segmented in order to manage the outcomes of encounter, and to reconcile the tension between the self in/and community. The segmented self can therefore be understood as a relational strategy through which different forms of becoming can be compartmentalised, causing the self to 'become a less coherent agent and a more decentred site of difference' (Rose 1997, 314). With these ideas in mind, I now consider how the self can be segmented through the embodiment of dancehall culture in Singapore.

The embodied appeal of dancehall culture

Dancehall is a style of music and dance that has become a resolutely embodied cultural phenomenon. It offers a culturally defined, and (sub-)culturally accepted, way in which the body can be dressed, moved and expressed. As a genre of dance, dancehall focuses on the pelvis; defining movements include 'wining' (the gyration of the hips), 'twerking' (thrusting the hips back and forth in a sexually provocative way) and 'dagging' (the simulation of sexual acts between male and female dancers). Executing movements like these requires a degree of openness to the primal, sexual potential of the body. By recognising the fact that the 'human body [a]s where the most significant symbols and practices of dancehall circulate' (Stolzoff 2000, 2), the appeal of dancehall culture therefore reflects the appeal of the body as the site of self-realisation. Dancehall reclaims the agency of the body in defining the self; as Bakare-Yusuf (2005, 266) puts it, 'the desire to assert agency [i]s expressed in the unification of voice and body, where performers and audience engaged in a (re)reading of the Jamaican body politics through the erotics of the carnal'. These can be interpreted as an affront to mainstream treatments of the body, and can therefore be seen to fuel a politics of how the body is represented in Jamaica and beyond. From the perspective of mainstream public opinion, dancehall culture is often seen as 'crude, debased, unrefined, vulgar, and even animal, and is condemned in the register of sexuality as "slackness" [or sexual proclivity]' (Henriques 2008, 227). Spaces of dancehall are therefore 'replete with nihilistic scenes of unabashed thrill-seeking, risk-taking sexual displays

and competing gender politics' (Frank 2007, 172), all of which can be seen to *free* the body from the inscriptions of normative, socio-culturally-defined, expectations of respectability.

These embodied freedoms manifest through the performance of the gendered, and relatedly, the sexual, self. In dancehall, women are known as 'queens' and men as 'kings', with these categorisations informing how each gender should move according to 'queens-style' or 'kings-style' dancing. As Stanley-Niaah (2004, 124) notes, 'the idea of "queen" as a category... reveals the consistently elevated place of woman as a key counterpart of the male "king"'. This elevation reflects the 'exhilarating frankness with which women have come to celebrate sexuality' (Sterling 2006, 3) through dancehall, with such frankness serving to empower women by 'insisting on the priority of their body's erotic agency' (Bakare-Yusuf 2005, 263). Often, the prioritisation of 'erotic agency' involves rejecting established notions of femininity, with queens expressing styles of dress and movement that are:

Self-consciously vulgar, women flaunt their bodies in glorious recklessness, unperturbed by the image of the slender ideal that haunts every woman in occidental contemporary culture... unmoved by Christian patriarchal righteousness and the discourse of reputation and respectability... Dancehall women freely expose and display physical excess with reverent playfulness, redefining the body as a site of beauty, power and sensuality (Bakare-Yusuf 2005, 268).

The appeal of dancehall, then, is the appeal that comes from releasing the self from the shackles of conformity, and embracing the primal potential of the human body instead. Stanley-Niaah (2004, 125) goes on to explain how, 'for the dancer and the queen in particular, Dancehall is a stage, a status granting institution outside the socially constricting everyday'. By overcoming the 'constricti[ons]' of the everyday, dancehall presents a performative channel through which its practitioners can participate in an alternative reality; a reality in which the body is free to represent the self without judgement or censorship (after Butler 1990). In doing so, it provides a channel through which the self can be expanded. Yet, with such expansion so too does the potential for the embodied self to come into contact and conflict with other, community-defined expectations of the self. As Saldanha (2005, 707) puts it, 'the interesting thing about music is that it changes people and circumstances, and it changes different people in different ways, according to differences in race, gender and class'. The practice of dancehall in any context around the world is therefore 'shaped by specific located and interconnected histories' (Nash 2000, 654), and can lead to the emergence of paradoxical spaces of freedom and suppression, of distance and difference. These paradoxical spaces are clearly observed in the conservative context of Singapore.

Paradoxical spaces of dancehall culture in Singapore

Paradoxical spaces refer to the tensions and negotiations that emerge when individuals embrace new – and implicitly different – cultural expressions than those found in the socio-cultural contexts in which they are embedded. They are, in other words, both a cause and outcome of cultural multiplicity, and are explored below in relation to the spaces of the body and the community. As the preceding section has shown, dancehall is an embodied, gendered and sexualised form of cultural expression. Singapore, on the other hand is a relatively conservative Asian country that has clearly defined cultural communities that are divided along ethnic (Chinese, Malay, Indian and Other) and religious (Buddhist/Taoist, Muslim, Hindu and Christian/Catholic) lines (see Kong and Woods 2019). These communities play a formative role in defining normative understandings of the gendered – and relatedly, the sexual – self. The empirical findings in the subsections that follow draw on nineteen interviews conducted in late-2018 amongst members of Singapore's dancehall community. Whilst accurately sizing Singapore's dancehall community is difficult, my interviewees suggested that it comprised approximately 50-80 regular dancers. The sample was relatively evenly split in terms of ethnicity (ten Chinese, eight Malay, one Malay-Filipino) and gender (eleven males, eight females). However, the vast majority of interviewees were in either their late-teens or early/mid-twenties. In itself, this reflects the youthful nature of Singapore's dancehall community, and the fact that people of this age around the world are exploring, and coming to terms with, who they are.

Unlike in other environments where dancehall is commonly practiced, Singapore has no Jamaican (or even Afro-Caribbean) diasporic population of note. Dancehall began to take root in Singapore approximately ten years ago, when Claire (not her real name; all names have been changed to ensure anonymity) – one of the pioneers of Singapore's dancehall scene, and one of my interviewees – returned to Singapore from the US. In the US she worked as a professional background dancer, supporting various singers, including Sean Paul, the renowned Jamaican dancehall artist. Through these experiences she began 'exploring the dancehall vibe', which she began teaching when she returned to Singapore. For other members of the community, dancehall was often the culmination of experimenting with different dance genres over many years. Most would start with culturally prescribed forms of dance (Malay dance, or ballet), before moving to dance genres like street jazz, urban and hip hop. Dancehall was viewed by my interviewees as culmination, as it required the greatest degree of 'openness' to the potential of the body. For example, Elle, a Chinese university student in her early-20s, recalled how 'I felt courage when I watched her [the dancehall teacher]' for the first time. For Elle, this courage was a source of validation that being open to her body was acceptable, despite what others may think. Part of the appeal of dancehall in Singapore, then, is the fact that it is rooted in an alien otherness that, through realising the freedom contained within their bodies, enables its practitioners to escape from the conservative context in which they live. The extent to which they can escape their context is, however, limited by the fact that they remain embedded within

their ethno-religious communities of belonging. Negotiating the dialectic of freedom and constraint, of there and here, of the self and community, underpins the formation of the segmented self in Singapore.

The three subsections that follow explore these ideas in more detail. The first considers how dancehall enables its practitioners to encounter embodied freedoms. The second considers how these freedoms lead to new understandings of – and, therefore, negotiations involving – gender and sexuality. The third reconciles the preceding two subsections with the ethno-religious communities of belonging in Singapore, by showing how the practice of dancehall can result in free bodies, but segmented selves.

Encountering embodied freedoms

In a general sense, the Singaporean self is defined by the ethno-religious community to which an individual belongs. Parents, teachers, peers and even the government all play a direct role in defining the Singaporean self. The body often plays a subordinate role in such definitions; if anything, it is something to be controlled through religious praxis, or valued as an engine of economic and reproductive labour. The primacy of the body in dancehall is a stark contrast to such normative conceptions. For example, Dax, a Chinese service worker in his mid-30s, observed that '[in Singapore] you must think and think, so dancehall is really something different'. He then went on to explain how 'when you want to dance with the ladies, you need to show you have a very good lower body... it's like Discovery Channel [laughs], so when you dance with her, you need to show that you're the best among the men'. Expressing male fecundity through the body is means of engaging with a new modality of being; a modality that involves escaping from the prescriptions and mental pressures of Singapore society, and to realise a more embodied ontology instead.

Amongst all of my interviewees, the primacy of the body encapsulated the freedom they sought through dancehall. Nur, a Malay polytechnic student in her late-teens, commented how 'dancehall should be, it's supposed to be free', before going on to state that 'people are quite closed-minded in Singapore'. In this sense, as much as the embodied freedoms of dancehall enable its practitioners to 'celebrate the joy of life', so too does it 're-energize the body politic' (Bakare-Yusuf 2005, 264). Embodied freedoms provide appeal, but so too can they be a point of tension. The freedom of the body did, in other words, sometimes contrast with the restrictive barriers of the mind, and of the conservatism of Singapore society more generally. For example, Cheryl, a Chinese working professional in her mid-20s, recalled how 'I feel [sic] very weird when I first started, I wondered "am I even doing it correctly?" I look so weird, I feel so weird'. This sentiment was echoed by most of my interviewees, and was formalised in the names of two of the dance crews that some of them represented: *Foreign Bodies* and *Slay Empire*. These names reveal a profound insight into both the 'weirdness' that Cheryl describes, and the colonising

restrictions of the socio-cultural world(s) in which they live. Building on these ideas, Edwin, a Chinese university student in his early-20s, spoke of how learning the sexually provocative movements of dancehall was a challenge for him, as 'when it comes down to king's style, the hips and everything... more of the thrusting and everything, I think Singapore, as a country, we are not very open to it'. He went on to explain how this lack of 'openness' to the body actually referred to a lack of openness to sexuality, which, in his view, limited the development of the dancehall community:

One of the biggest obstacles of our community here in Singapore is the fact that we are still very conservative. When it comes down to dancehall movements and everything, we tend to pick the less sexualised ones... There is still some resistance. Even as a dancehall dancer, when you learn certain set of movements and everything, other dancers, they will perceive [judge] you.

The sentiment that Edwin explains here reveals a concern about being judged by others. For Nur, this was not a problem – 'my mentality is, like, just go for it' – but she did recognise that for dancers like Edwin, the mind could be a barrier for bodily expression: 'for others, what's stopping them is probably just their mentality of how people might portray them. Like, look at them... For me, the fear is not knowing how to do it'. Thus, whilst Edwin is concerned with being judged by others in relation to the normative limits of sexual expression, Nur is concerned with being judged by other dancers for not being able to 'do' dancehall properly. This sentiment was reiterated by Claire, introduced above, who admitted that when she first started dancing dancehall 'it wasn't an immediate click... Asian bodies are different from how a Jamaican might move... they [Jamaicans] have the essence'; and Elle, also introduced above, who first proclaimed that 'body does matter' and then added that better dancers have 'bigger butts'. Interestingly, such sentiment – which reflects concerns about how they may not be able to express themselves properly due to physiological differences – was shared by female interviewees only. For males, the limitations were more likely to be mental, as the dominant sexuality of dancehall masculinity was something to be learnt, and to come to terms with. For many, this meant having to recalibrate their terms of engagement with females, and to renegotiate the boundary between them. Ahmad, a Malay polytechnic student in his early-20s, explained how:

There's no judging, no restrictions. I mean, there *is* restrictions; you can't just touch a girl on their sensitive parts, that's just disrespectful. But when it comes to dance, you're just expressing, like, feeling each other and stuff like that. I think in that safe space, it's just a form of expression.

The tension Ahmad explains here is between expression and restriction. Dancehall provides a 'safe space' through which he can 'reconnect' to his 'erotic potential' (Bakare-Yusuf 2005, 270); it encourages him to express his embodied masculinity, whereas society imposes restrictions on the extent to which he can do so. As Slocum (2008, 849; Slocum 2007) argues, 'race emerges through the

movement, clustering and encounter of phenotypically differentiated bodies'. Movement can similarly cause Singaporean bodies – which are otherwise represented in ways that reflect the ethno-religious community to which they belong – to become *dancehall* bodies. With this, they become re-racialised through an embrace of the gendered and sexual potential associated with this Caribbean-centric cultural form. The limits of re-racialisation were, however, acutely felt when Jamaican dancehall instructors and artists visited Singapore to give workshops. Cheryl, introduced above, explained one such visit:

Everyone had a culture shock... Usually we would host an after-party the night after the last workshop... The Jamaicans, they party in their own way, which is daggering. To them, daggering is a very common thing. We are exposed, we have watched the videos, but we don't do that here. Mainly because of the mindset, we are still very conservative in a way... To me, it's a little too much.

Daggering represents some of the more extreme movements of dancehall, with Cheryl's admission that 'we don't do that here' revealing the paradoxical underpinnings of spaces of dancehall culture in Singapore. The embodied freedoms of dancehall are a source of appeal for young Singaporeans, but so too do they reflect a form of embodied expression that is still mediated by the enduring conservatism of Singapore society. These paradoxical spaces were most acutely observed when dancehall was used as a means by which Singaporeans could negotiate new understandings of gender and sexuality; understandings that sometimes contrasted with normative understandings in Jamaica.

Negotiating new understandings of the gendered and sexual self

Dancehall culture can be understood to offer an extreme representation of the gendered self; a representation in which the defining characteristics of males and females are highlighted and exaggerated in humorous, empowering and sometimes grotesque ways. Hope (2006) explains how dancehall culture reproduces a 'hypermasculine' discourse that feeds on the 'amplified and exaggerated masculinity' of the black male (Gilroy 1993, 85). These representations are relatively unique in Singapore. For example, Zul, a Malay-Filipino male in his late-20s who works in the service industry, observed how Jamaican men 'are like, *really* manly men'. In the context of Jamaica, or of Jamaican diasporic communities, such representations are aligned with the socio-cultural norms in which they are performed, thus serving to demonstrate and reinforce how 'dancing bodies enact particular gendered, ethnic and class positions in society' (Cresswell 2006, 57). In the Singapore context, however, such representations could be a source of tension and intimidation. For example, Ren, another of the pioneers of Singapore's dancehall scene, explained the tension that was felt when the Jamaican dancehall instructor introduced above visited Singapore:

That's how people have been brought up [in Singapore], you know, men respecting women. And this guy here was like, the king, and all the women around him have to be, like... He comes from that culture, and you have to respect it. But it's a culture shock for us. So, we have to like struggle between how we feel about it, and how to show our respect to him at the same time without offending [him].

The 'culture shock' that Ren describes echoes the sentiments of Cheryl, quoted above. Both are female dancehall practitioners, who are therefore on the receiving end of his hyper-masculine advances. Simply put, because the Jamaican instructor and Ren were brought together in the performative space of dancehall, the instructor expected Ren to be as sexually open as he was – to the point of daggering with him. The embodied sexuality of dancehall is one of its defining features; amongst the Jamaican underclasses, 'sexuality [i]s a discourse of power in the society' (Pinnock 2007, 55). Whilst this was not lost on the Singapore dancehall community – Ren, for example, observed how 'in Jamaica, they praise women, like, "I want to have your babies"' – it was shocking as they felt forced to fulfil the role of female counterpart to the Jamaican male. Paradoxically, fulfilling these gender-defined roles is part of the empowerment, and therefore the appeal, that some Singaporean females found in dancehall. For example, Aisha – a Malay (and therefore Muslim) female in her late-teens – explained how the female in dancehall is 'so different... the way she carries herself, she doesn't mind wearing booty shorts, she doesn't care... everything is just, like... very overwhelming'. Despite being 'overwhelming', it also provided an alternative vision of the female body that could, in Singapore, be liberating. As Cooper (2004, 126) explains, the role of the female in dancehall 'can be theorized as an act of self-conscious female assertion of control over the representation of her person'. In the socio-cultural context of Singapore, where females – especially Malay-Muslim females – are often encouraged to represent themselves in a conservative way, the 'assertions' of dancehall provide new opportunities to explore the female self.

Amongst young Malay-Muslim females in particular, and Singaporean females more generally, the liberating power of such assertions needed to be negotiated within the context of the conservative ethno-religious communities in which they were embedded. Often, these negotiations revolved around the sexualisation of the female body that dancehall promotes. Aisha went on to explain how her parents 'didn't really like' her participating in dancehall competitions, and how they 'were asking things like "what are you going to wear for your competition? Are you going to wear something more exposed?"'. Dance competitions cause public representations of Malay-Muslim femininity and dancehall femininity to come into contact with one another, causing tension. More conceptually, these negotiations arise from the fact that dancehall 'intervene[s] against repressive attitudes towards female sexuality, appearance and comportment' and allows them to 'express sexual power and affirm their own sexual objectification at the same time' (Bakare-Yusuf 2006, 471). In Singapore, this dialectic of expression and objectification highlights how the freedom of the body in dancehall can

contrast with the restrictions of the communities in which dancers are embedded. Dancehall provides a performative channel that can lead to 'challenging and parodying these naturalized codes' (Nash 2000, 655; after Butler 1990) of identification and self-understanding. Indeed, in the context of being a Malay-Muslim female, the practice of dancehall does not just present a challenge to these 'codes', but an outright rejection of them (after Bell 1995).

Whilst these tensions were commonly observed amongst female dancers, so too were they experienced by a more specific subset of Singapore's dancehall community – Malay males who used dancehall to explore and perform their (homo)sexuality. Indeed, the embrace of dancehall by homosexual Malay males underscores one of the most enduring paradoxes of dancehall culture in Singapore. Not only does dancehall culture reproduce masculine heteronormativity in an extreme way, but, in many respects, so too does the Malay-Muslim culture from which such males seek to escape. As Brown (1999, 10) explains:

The fear of being called a "batty man" in Jamaican society runs deep in the construction of male identity as the homosexual other becomes the negative that feeds heterosexual male identities... feminine behaviour is condemned in males and is seen as a "flag" identifying one as being gay.

Jamaican dancehall culture reproduces these constructions and condemnations in extreme, and sometimes violent, ways. Yet, in Singapore, dancehall provides a performative channel that some males use to realise their homosexual selves. In this sense, the embodied freedoms of dancehall are pursued in a way that contravenes the cultural norms from which they stem, creating another paradoxical space of dancehall culture. Claire, introduced above, explained how she rejected this paradox when growing Singapore's dancehall community:

When we first started doing [dancehall], all the gay boys loved it. Because of the music, the way they moved and everything. And we loved it, we loved the vibes they brought, we didn't stop them from doing it, and we still don't... Nobody cares about how you dance. In class, you want to go do like a queen, go ahead, we'll clap for you.

As Claire mentions, one of the most notable transgressions performed by homosexual male dancehall practitioners in Singapore is that they prefer to perform queen's style – a female role. As Edwin explained, 'they [homosexual dancers] are keen to do the queen's style, they feel like, I would say, it is a platform for them to express themselves', whilst Cheryl explained the culturally transgressive nature of such an act: 'in Jamaica, they do have certain things that only guys can do or only girls can do... basically, the guys are not allowed to do queen style, that's a no-no thing'. The performative freedom that dancehall provides goes beyond movement. For example, Rafi, a Malay male in his early-20s who identifies as a closet bisexual, explained how 'when I perform or

compete, my costume is more of the feminine side; I use make-up, and, basically, not really cross-dress, but I dress up as a girl'. In this sense, Rafi takes the embodied freedom of dancehall to the extreme, not only performing the gendered movements of a woman, but of dressing up as one as well. For him, dancehall is a sort of 'safety valve' (Wieschiolek 2003); a performative charade that enables him to experiment with, and experience, a different gender-based version of himself without fear of judgement or retribution. Notably, for him, dancehall provided the performative channel through which he could segment himself. Over time, however, the boundaries between these segments have started to blur, to the point that his parents now 'know that I'm not straight, certainly not straight'. Blurring the boundaries of the self in such a way reveals the emancipatory logics through the processes of segmentation evolve. Whilst the embodied freedoms that lead to segmentation enable the experimentation with different ways of being, for some the paradoxes that are reflected in the transgressions wrought by such embodied freedoms could prove to be problematic. Zul, introduced above, openly identifies as homosexual, and, after speaking about how he reconciled the different segments of his self-representation over time, spoke of how he had trouble reconciling the embodied freedoms of dancehall with the rigidly gendered expectations of dancehall culture:

When I dance, I feel pretty free. I feel like I'm myself. But then again, when you're talking about that, like, what does it mean by "your" self? When I dance, am I doing it effeminately, or am I doing it in king's style? But then, with me, with dancehall, I've learnt that, as a guy, I cannot do queen's style. So, then I learnt that I've been doing queen's style all along, but then after that I learnt that you're not allowed to because you're a guy.

Here we can see how Zul is forced into a position of having to negotiate the embodied freedoms of dancehall with the expectations of the global dancehall community that he identifies with. In this sense, the 'freedom' of dancehall is moderated by the gendered expectations – and restrictions – of the dancehall community. These negotiations go beyond what Zul describes above, and were felt by all interviewees in some way or another, and spanned both the global dancehall community, and the local ethno-religious communities to which they belong. It is these negotiations that underpin the realisation of segmented selves.

Free bodies, segmented selves

In Singapore, spaces of dancehall are paradoxical insofar as they enable embodied freedoms to be realised, yet such realisations occur within an overarching framework of conservatism. In other words, whilst dancehall provides a chance for freedom, it is a fleeting experience that, for many, is difficult to reconcile with the everyday ethno-religious communities to which they belong. The challenges of reconciliation play out through space. Whereas the

dance studio always started off as the 'safe' (or performative) space through which embodied freedoms could be pursued (and the self segmented), over time the blurring of boundaries between segments would cause the embodied self to have an increasingly public presence. Often, this would start by sharing videos of the self performing dancehall choreography to music on Instagram and other social media platforms (despite the risk of parental, peer and/or community surveillance), before graduating to practicing dancehall in public spaces, and eventually performing dancehall at public events. Segmented selves are necessarily fluid representations of the self; they ebb and flow in line with the 'local and temporary thickenings of interacting bodies' (Saldanha 2006, 18) that become manifest through the movements and performances of dance. Notwithstanding, this process was often fraught, and many interviewees reported getting stuck at one stage or another. As Edwin explained, dancehall 'is about being... I would say, someone that I cannot be in real life'. This idea of adopting another persona is common amongst dancehall practitioners worldwide; in interviews with dancehall performers in Jamaica, for example, Stanley-Niaah (2004, 128) recalls how 'repeated references to feelings of becoming or assuming another persona or self were observed'. In this sense, then, the practice of dancehall in Singapore is not unique. Where it is unique, however, is in how different the 'other persona or self' is in relation to pre-defined expectations of behaviour and dress. For example, Zhang Wei, a Chinese male in his late-teens, explained how his mother:

say[s] that when I perform, I'm not me. Because when I perform, you need expression and all. Sometimes I need to show that I'm fierce... and it's not how I am in real life. It's very different. So, she's like, "it's not you".

Being 'not me' when performing dancehall speaks to the idea that there are different selves, each of which plays a different performative role in life. In doing so, it highlights the fact that embodied freedoms are difficult to translate into cognitive or emotional freedoms, especially outside of the dance studio, or the performative space of dancehall more generally. Zhang Wei went on to explain how, in the space of the dancehall studio, 'you don't have to know each other, but you can still dance together'. Cheryl reiterated this sentiment in a more specific way, admitting that 'it's amazing that even if I've only seen a guy once in a previous class, I'm totally fine dancing with him in the next class'. Both reveal how the openness of the dancehall studio enables them to engage with other dancers in less guarded ways, but this openness often did not necessarily translate to their engagement with others *outside* the studio. Various reasons contribute to this, but by far the most common was that it is simply easier – socially and emotionally – to remain segmented. Segmentation is a response to the need to manage competing demands on, and expectations of, the self by both the individual, and the broader communities in which they live. Cheryl went on to explain how segmenting her self – representationally and spatially – enables her to manage the expectations of her boyfriend, even though she still 'argue[s] with my boyfriend a lot, because he's seen it [dancehall] and cannot accept this'. Ironically, then, as much as the corporeality of dancehall empowers

the dancer, so too does it represent the body in ways that society-at-large 'cannot accept'. Similarly, Rafi spoke of how his cousins 'don't understand why I'm doing this [dancehall], every time I have gatherings, they'll ask me, "why are you doing this? Why can't you be a normal person?"'. The normality expected of him by his cousins coheres with the expectations of what it means to be a Malay male, whereas dancehall provides a performative channel through which he can realise a different, albeit antagonistic, aspect of his self.

This antagonism suggests that the segmentation of the self is a coping strategy through which youths are able to accommodate the diverse cultural roles they are expected to play in their lives. Rafi put it well when he stated that 'I use dance as a way to express myself, right? I just don't [think] I can merge those two characters together. Sometimes it's good to have split personalities, you know?' The 'split personalities' he refers to are the outward representations of the segmented self, and reflect the accommodations that many of the dancehall community in Singapore must negotiate. These accommodations were observed amongst my Malay-Muslim interviewees in particular, who tended to lead the most segmented lives. All of them spoke of the separation they enforced between their Muslim identities, and the embodied freedoms of dancehall. Ahmad, for example, explained how 'I don't really intersect these two [Islam and dancehall] at all... If we were to start putting religion inside this kind of stuff, then might as well we don't dance in the first place', whilst Tariq, another Malay male in his late-teens, reiterated this sentiment, explaining how 'I still carry out my religion, but what I dance, I try not to mix it with the way I behave as a Muslim'. Aisha offered a female perspective to this sentiment, explaining how 'I do have friends who have their headscarf on and are still dancing, doing dancehall, but, I mean... it's just not nice'. Segmentation of the self is, in these senses, a way of coping with contrasting expressions of culturally informed notions of gender and sexuality. It is a practical solution to the problem of reconciling the expectations of community with the desires of the self that many youths grapple with on a daily basis. Nur reflected this positivity when she told me how she reconciled being a Muslim female with being a practitioner of dancehall:

Actually, that's the funny thing... not a lot of people know this, but I'm actually quite religious. I'm the type that will pray five times a day. I will go to the mosque, that kind of thing. It's just that when they see me dance, they'll be like "are you sure you go to the mosque?", because it's really suggestive. That's why I like dancehall, because I can be that person, but I don't have to be that person in real life.

The point here is that dancehall is not 'real' life, as Nur puts it; rather, it is a way of escaping from reality through a culturally-defined way of expressing body. Through the body, then, young people are able to explore the self in new, and often emancipatory, ways. Whether it is exploring a new sexual identity, or pushing the culturally-prescribed boundaries of gender, dancehall is a channel of freedom through which a new, more plural self can be realised. Indeed, in

speaking to the specific ideas raised by Nur above, we can see how by representing the 'female body as unruly and hyper-feminine, dancehall women show femininity to be a masquerade, a kind of mask' (Bakare-Yusuf 2006, 472). Dancehall frees the feminine self from the rigid prescriptions of conservatism, whilst the segmentation of the self provides the opportunity to pursue such freedoms in a way that will avoid condemnation from others. The embodied self is just one aspect of a more holistic construct that is forged over time and experience. Yet, it is a no less important segment than the other segments of the self that jostle together to inform the lives on young people living in a world of cultural multiplicity.

Conclusions

Dancehall is a uniquely powerful form of cultural practice. This is true anywhere in the world, but especially so in Singapore, where young people remain, in many respects, indentured to the conservative, pragmatic, and often culturally prescriptive ethno-religious communities into which they were born. Through its resolutely embodied practices and appeal, dancehall provides an avenue through which the boundaries of gender and sexuality can be explored, and new understanding of the embodied self can be forged. Indeed, it is the embodiment of the self that foregrounds the segmentation of the self, which, as I have argued above, can be read as a coping mechanism for living in a world of cultural multiplicity. In these respects, the practice of dancehall in Singapore illuminates a new way in which 'dance... has been and continues to be an object of struggle in modernity and postmodernity' (Cresswell 2006, 57). Yet, whilst Cresswell (2006, 57) goes on to state how 'attempts have been made to channel threatening mobilities into acceptable conduits', the practices of segmenting the self observed above suggests that multiplicity can be a more powerful solution than compromise. Experiencing the self through the lens of cultural practice can serve to reinstate the 'border imaginaries' of difference, and serves to reproduce notions of 'us versus them' (Kong and Woods 2019; Rovisco 2010, 1015) within the self. It is a new form of internal diversity that goes beyond performativity and reflects the 'conscious reflexivity, negotiation [and] agency in the doing of identity' (Nelson 1999, 332; Woods 2020). The intentionality of self-realisation is, in this sense, a response to the conditions of socio-cultural superdiversity – and complexity – in which many people now live.

To build on the ideas raised in this paper, I identify two areas for further research. The first is theoretical, and is to bring the notions of embodied freedoms, and segmented selves, into conversation with other discourses and debates surrounding inter-cultural contact and negotiation. These could include cosmopolitanism, social integration, and citizenship. Doing so would provide further insight into the ways in which individuals manage socio-cultural complexity in the contemporary world. The second is more applied, and relates to the ways in which embodied freedoms and segmented selves are navigated across space and time. Whilst these applications were outside the scope of this

project, it is important to know how encounters with the self play out across the spaces of everyday life, how they evolve with age, and how they come to inform perceptions of, and engagements with, others. These oscillations are particularly important when the self is embedded within conservative contexts where self-segmentation can become a strategy of socio-cultural emancipation, and emotional resilience.

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