



# Heterosexism and Homophobia in the Caribbean Dancehall Context

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## Abstract

This paper explores how dancehall lyrics reproduce heterosexist and homophobic discourses in the LGBTQ community within a Caribbean dancehall context. It advances notable scholarship (Chunnu 2021, Hope, 2021) on dancehall lyrics by drawing on standard parallels of the colonial same-sex practices used to denigrate enslaved Africans and the Eurocentric religious ideal that LGBTQ customs contravene Judeo-Christian doctrine. Dancehall music originated in Jamaica within the neo-colonial period (since the 1980s) coming out of reggae. Dancehall is the musical expression of the working-class black masses used to protest the criminogenic continuities of colonial history. Although dancehall acted as a form of

protest against the colonially entangled inequalities, heterosexism prevailed and continued to shape the checkered reality of coloniality within Jamaica and T&T societies. As such, this study explores the present-day identities of the LGBTQIA community expressed through the dancehall lyrics created within the 1990-2010 period utilising autobiography, critical discourse analysis by Fairclough and gender performativity theory by Judith Butler. In doing so, the researcher connected dancehall lyrics to heterosexism through an analysis of discourses within religion, sex and sexuality. Such discourses contributed to advancing the understanding of stigmatisation, criminalisation and dehumanisation of the LGBTQ community in a cross-cultural Caribbean context.

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This paper critically explores how dancehall lyrics, produced during the 1990–2010 period, re-enforce pre-existing heterosexist discourses within Trinidad and Tobago (T&T) and Jamaica. The authors situate the analysis within Hope’s (2021: 4) terminology ‘femmephobia,’ which is ‘the patent fear of feminization and male disempowerment that emanates particularly from Jamaica’s disempowered lower classes.’ The article also advances Chavannes’ (1994) understanding of the Delilah complex (cited in Hope, 2021), whereby femininity is seen as a danger as it has the potential to weaken male masculinity. The authors engage this academic discourse and draw on dancehall lyrics, through the translation of Jamaican patois into English, and on the authors’ high school experiences in T&T. In this way, the article aims to fulfil the feminist principle of making the personal political.

This research does not aim to generalise the distinct identities among all members of the LGBTQ community. Instead, the authors use this acronym as a critical, analytical, and interpretive tool to label dancehall lyrics that reflect heterosexist ideologies. The authors focus specifically on the Caribbean male to argue that dancehall lyrics fixate on non-heterosexual men. This view supports the argument of Lewis (cited in Brown, 1999: 6), who contends that it is impossible to analyse the Caribbean male without distinguishing between hegemonic masculinity and other ‘subordinated forms of masculinity’. Hegemonic masculinity is defined as:

‘An orientation which is heterosexual and

decidedly homophobic. It prides itself on its capacity for sexual conquest and ridicules those men who define their masculinity in different terms. Hegemonic masculinity often embraces misogynist tendencies in which women are considered to be inferior. Departure from this form of masculinity could result in the questioning of one’s manhood.’ (Brown, 1999: 6)

Gutzmore (2004: 1) argues that ending hatred against LGBTQ people starts with identifying five homophobic imperatives: ‘religious fundamentalism, heterosexual naturalism, legalism, cultural nationalism, and child protection, which are held to drive the discriminatory discourses and practices.’ Thus, to transform this problem, it is important to disentangle small-level and taken-for-granted discourses that reassert linkages between dancehall lyrics, colonial history, and cross-cultural Caribbean identities in the neo-colonial present. In essence, this study sheds light on the way(s) that dancehall music is expressed within colonially entangled power structures that have shaped identities within the present-day neo-colonial Jamaican and T&T contexts.

This study adopts a transhistorical approach by contextualising heterosexist discourses within a colonial past. However, greater attention is placed on a comparative analysis within the post-independent (post-1990) contemporary era by emphasising how widely held cultural viewpoints and expressions of heteronormativity are rearticulated in Jamaican dancehall lyrics and, uniquely, in their reception in Trinidad and Tobago. In doing so, the authors utilise the theory of gender performativity and explore how dancehall lyrics reproduce culturally embedded heterosexism. According to Butler (1998: 2): ‘Gender is in no way a stable identity or locus of agency from which various acts proceed; rather, it is an identity tenuously constituted in time, an identity instituted through a stylized repetition of acts.’ Bodily gestures, movements, and enactments of various kinds constitute the illusion of an abiding gendered self (Butler, 1998: 2). This study shows how the performative acts within dancehall lyrics reproduce the dehumanisation and degradation of LGBTQ identities.

This research, through autobiography and lyrical discourse, discusses popular dancehall lyrics. The

authors are citizens of T&T and do not have a cultural background in the intricacies of Jamaican dancehall music. However, they ground their analysis by reflecting on songs that were popular in their high school days, and which shaped perceptions of LGBTQ individuals within their socialisation. The dancehall music selected for research analysis draws on popular culture familiar to the authors during their high school experiences from 2005–2010 (i.e. the period when the authors attended high school, not necessarily when the songs were created). The origins of the songs span between 1990–2010. The songs selected for analysis include, but are not limited to: 'Batty Boi Fi Dead', which was made by Beenie Man in 2005; 'Batty Boy (Stay Far From We)', created by Dr Evil in 2006; and 'Boom Bye Bye', formed by Buju Banton in 1988, made famous in 1992. These songs were analysed using the Jamaican Patwah dictionary, which translated the patois identified in the dancehall lyrics into English.

Music plays a significant role in shaping socio-cultural discourses. In the 2000s, popular music often supported the ideals of heteronormativity. When the authors initially encountered these tracks, the focus was mainly on the beat. While singing along for entertainment, the authors failed to recognise the violence and heteronormative ideology that was intrinsically engineered into the music. For instance, songs such as 'Batty Boy Fi Dead' depicted gruesome tales which honoured, glorified, and promoted murder, abuse, and hate towards non-heteronormative behaviours. During the authors' high school experiences, any comment or song that mentioned or pointed to a non-heteronormative behaviour was ridiculed, repudiated strongly, or seen as horrendous or hateful. Buju Banton's controversial song 'Boom Bye Bye' was supported by famous singer Red Dragon where he said in the lyrics that non-heterosexual men must die. Such a message has a drastic impact on the broader society and, unfortunately, has been normalised.

Heteronormativity sets an automatic assumption about homosexuality, which may result in social pressures leading individuals to react violently towards people from these minority groups. The authors observed that some of the male students bullied other male students who were not interested in sports and rather expressed interest in music, writing, and poetry. The authors grew up in a space

where anything that was not part of God's teaching was seen as an abomination. Thus, lesbians and gays were seen as an abomination in the eyes of God. Due to this, many of the authors' friends, who came from similar religious backgrounds, hid their sexual preferences to prevent being disgraced by their families and community members. So far, the authors have lost two friends to suicide because these friends could no longer live a double life and they feared the society would ostracise them if they were honest about themselves.

Much of dancehall music promoted an ideology of violence towards the LGBTQ community. For instance, at a party, as noted in contemporary vulgarity, as soon as the anti-gay songs came on, the homosexuals in that space were automatically intimidated since the others looked upon them with scorn. When this music was entirely consumed, it had the potential for mind control, which on numerous occasions led to sounds of gunshots, making people fear for their lives. As the authors gazed into the lyrics of these songs, it was disturbing and disappointing that as a younger generation with access to a world of information, we participated and supported such melodies and rhythms without an adequate investigation or a healthy understanding of what we were promoting. In other words, despite the blatant vulgarity and horrifying messages embedded in the music, we failed to see the wrong in it.

Kitzinger (2005: 478) describes heteronormativity as 'the myriad ways in which heterosexuality is produced as a natural, unproblematic, taken-for-granted phenomenon.' The concept assumes that within society, people must conform to the gendered roles, ideals, stereotypes, and expectations. Deviating from these norms can initiate specific, robust sanctions, and repudiation. Dancehall music is a medium to channel and re-enforce this oppression. Interestingly, these songs are so powerful that although the authors were never self-proclaimed homophobes, they sang along to the songs without realising the impact of these lyrics and their subliminal messages. It was not until they reached university that the authors began to explore and reflect on dancehall language.

LGBTQ performers such as the Jamaican actor and

comedian Keith ‘Shebada’ Ramsey have enjoyed success and overwhelming support, while drawing the ire of the dancehall community. Shebada is embraced through the power of his position as an artist and the talented nature of his craft, similarly to globally revered LGBTQ personalities such as Elton John. This acceptance may not extend to the average, underprivileged LGBTQ individual living in Jamaica. Shebada’s charismatic and self-confident personality is reminiscent of Saucy Pow in Trinidad and Tobago, who is known to be unapologetically non-heterosexual and popularly known in T&T for his extravagant dances at parties. Such examples of celebrities who enjoy some level of acceptance does not discount the perilous threats, risk, and brutality that these individuals face. Shebada and Saucy Pow have both spoken publicly about receiving death threats and facing abuse (Souza, 2018).

Jamaica and Trinidad and Tobago share a cultural legacy of colonialism that incorporates a long history of discrimination towards gender diversity and same-sex sexualities. These Caribbean territories were not always vehemently homophobic. In the pre-colonial era, there were many examples of indigenous communities that provided a cultural space where gender nonconforming people were accepted, particularly the Two-Spirit people, which was an umbrella term to describe persons who fulfilled the third gender. Colonisers also brought the Eurocentric version of Christianity, which criminalised non-heteronormative behaviours (Stewart, 2017: 1–102). It should be noted, however, that many religious scholars argue that the biblical texts traditionally used to condemn homosexuality, such as the story of Sodom and Gomorrah, have been misunderstood and misrepresented (Gnuse, 2015: 68–87). Atluri (2015: 309) notes that: ‘The privileging of heterosexist norms and the patriarchal family by the nation-state has its roots not in any indigenous school of thought, but rather in colonial values.’ Before 2018, Trinidad and Tobago had a buggery law, whereby anal sex carried a twenty-five-year sentence and oral sex carried a five-year sentence. Jamaican buggery laws or anti-sodomy laws dated back to the colonial-era 1864 Offences Against the Person Act (LGBT Issues in Jamaica, 2012: 1–2).

Christianity and colonialism introduced notions of ‘respectability’ in sexual mores and ideologies that repudiated non-procreative sexual acts (LaFont, 2001;

Smith, 1965 (cited in Charles, 2011: 8)). These living legacies of colonialism are present in dancehall lyrics and are reinforced by both the colonially entangled institutions and masses within Jamaica. Cowell (2011: 31–60) responded to Cooper’s analysis that dancehall is a ‘metaphorical revolt against law and order,’ saying rather that it seemed aligned with the ‘pious morality and conservative gender ideology of fundamentalist Jamaican society,’ at least insofar as it relates to conservative outlooks on same-sexualities. Such homophobic discrimination has been challenged by varying groups. Both the Coalition Advocating for Inclusion of Sexual Orientation (CAISO), which was founded in 2007, and the Jamaica Forum of Lesbians, All-Sexuals and Gays (J-Flag), which was founded in 1998 and forms part of the Caribbean Forum of Lesbians, All-Sexuals and Gays (C-FLAG), are civil society organisations in Trinidad and Tobago and Jamaica that challenge socio-cultural discrimination by advocating for the rights and freedoms of LGBTQ communities.

Dancehall plays an ambiguous role within Jamaican society because, on the one hand, it reinforces religious values but, on the other, is painted as a genre that promotes vulgarity (Hope, 2006: 1–168). Heterosexism in dancehall lyrics has become a problem globally since the 1990s after songs such as Buju Banton’s ‘*Boom Bye-Bye*’ caught international interest and attention. Hope (2021: 4) identifies this song as opening up the early debate of male non-heteronormative sexuality and in response to the ‘early movement of the male homosexual body from the hidden corners

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and cloaked spaces to the heterosexual public space of Jamaica.' Additionally, dancehall has been rooted in society as its 'fundamentalist brand of Christianity' and 'Rastafarian religion' condemn non-heteronormative behaviours and are inculcated in the values of many dancehall artists. Dancehall also plays a role within the political arena. For instance, in 2001, Tok's song titled 'Chi Chi man' was the theme song of the Jamaican Labour Party (JLP), and the People's National Party (PNP) took on the slogan 'Log on to progress' that referred to a song by Elephant Man, which featured anti-LGBTQ lyrics (Rogers, 2010: 1-161).

Despite the controversy surrounding dancehall, it can be argued that it has ties to other genres of Jamaican music rooted in a form of resistance to colonial oppression. These genres include Mento, Ska, Rocksteady, and Reggae. In particular, we emphasise Jamaican icons like Bob Marley who, through music, stood up against racial injustice and canonised Black revolutionaries such as Marcus Garvey. Nevertheless, non-heteronormative sexualities were largely invisible and, in some instances, marginalised within their music. Queen Ifrica patterned heterosexist lyrics in their songs, which were influenced by biblical scriptures. For instance, Queen Ifrica's song 'Keep it to yourself' was championed as a reggae tune that reinforced heterosexist ideals in society by drawing on religious scripture. The song's lyrics include the following:

'Yu fi multiply an replenish di Earth,  
An dats why di woman labor inna child birth,  
Mi nuh want si mi brother dress up inna no skirt'

The first verse draws on biblical scripture that speaks of being fruitful and multiplying, which meant that reproduction was the duty of humankind and ultimately signalled that relationships that deviate from such a purpose are problematic. The reggae artist illustrated this in the following two verses that spoke of women as child-bearers and not wanting to see men or women switch roles where a man wore a 'skirt', which referred to playing a woman's role.

In 2004, Brian Williamson – co-founder of Jamaica's only gay rights organisation (J-Flag) – was murdered at his home. The police concluded that this incident resulted from a robbery that went wrong, but other activists remained doubtful of this assessment. Gareth

Henry, the man who replaced Williamson in 2007, was also pursued and had to go into hiding. Heterosexism maintained its space within the dancehall context for a long time, but activists began to emphasise the sheer horror of the verbal violence in dancehall lyrics, also termed 'murder music.' British human rights activist Peter Tatchell coordinated the 'Stop the Murder Music' initiative, which urged sponsors to pull funding and to cancel bookings and venues for artists who produced anti-LGBTQ music. This initiative led to the signing of the Reggae Compassionate Act in 2007, in which numerous dancehall artists promised to no longer produce murder music and to renounce their homophobia. Cooper argued that the invitations found within dancehall lyrics to 'murda', 'bun', or 'step pon' chi-chi man (murder, burn, or step on gay men) were playful and metaphorical lyrical gestures that were not incitements to homophobic attack (cited in Noble, 2008: 4). Noble raised two essential questions: who got to determine what comprises a homophobic attack? Secondly, was verbal abuse acceptable if it does not equate to physical violence? Noble further stated that 'Cooper's position both denies the power of language to shape reality and unremorsefully accepts the accusation of being an apologist for Dancehall's homophobia' (2008: 4).

Dancehall lyrics typically reinforce heterosexist discourses through metaphor or allusion. For instance, in his song titled 'Batty Boy (Stay Far From We)', Dr Evil stated that he had a general dislike for the word 'bottom', an allusion to anal sex. In the contemporary Jamaican dancehall context (2010–present), violent homophobic lyrics are on the decline due to years of 'censorship'. However, 'most dancehall artistes still express their disapproval for this lifestyle in a subtle manner' (MM, 2013). Bounty Killer, for instance, stated the following in reaction to dancehall selector Tony Matterhorn: 'Man, no act so, that's feminine gender; he em fi stop that' [Man don't act so (like how Tony Matterhorn acts), he acts like a female, and he needs to stop that].

Heteronormative discourses such as these are visible in print, social media, and within lyrical discourses. Dancehall lyrics often draw on informal language that resonates with a variety of audiences, giving a creole everyday understanding of religious 'values' in society. Common expressions are used that appeal to multiple audiences. For instance, 'Vagina was made

for penis, not penis for penis, not penis for anus.' Parallels can also be found between biblical scriptures and dancehall lyrics. For example, the dancehall lyrics 'Man to man is so unjust, Man to man just brings disgust' and 'Nah promote no nasty man, dem haffi dead' are reminiscent of certain passages in Leviticus.

The discourse presented within Christian religious texts (as interpreted by some, and contested by others) suggests that Sodom and Gomorrah were destroyed because of sexual immorality. This discourse is reflected in dancehall lyrics such as Buju Banton's 'Boom Bye Bye' (1988):

'World is in trouble, Anytime Buju Banton comes  
Batty bwoy [homosexual male]  
Get up an run [leave]  
Boom bye bye inna batty boy head [Let me shoot you]'

These lyrics point to how homophobic aspects of Christianity are expressed within dancehall lyrics in vulgar and violent ways. Expressions of homophobia are also evident in the lyrics of Dr Evil's 'Batty Boy (Stay Far From We)':

'Batty boy [homosexual male]  
Dem need fi stay far we [They need to stay away or leave]  
'Cause we nuh inna wha' dem inna (nope!) [We are not promoting that homosexual (penis with penis) sexual behaviour]  
Pussy a wha' buddy fi a go inna [We are promoting heterosexual (vagina with penis) behaviour']

From these lyrics, it is essential to note that on a societal level, sexual orientation is viewed in binary terms: man and woman, and 'penis and vagina'. This binary, therefore, excludes non-heteronormative relationships, but it also extends to a broader understanding of what constitutes 'sexual misconduct'. Some dancehall lyrics suggest that 'sexual misconduct' includes men performing oral sex on women. For instance:

'Wha u nuh fi do, fuck bottom' [Men! What are you not to do? Have anal sex.]  
'Wha u nuh fi do, suck pum pum' [Men! What

are you not to do? Have oral sex.]

This points to the concept within hegemonic masculinity that dictates that men must be dominant. The idea of men bending down to women through the medium of performing oral sex is interpreted as emasculating. This is suggested in another song titled 'Do not bend down' by Lovindeer, created pre-1990, which clarifies the idea that men, in particular, should not bend down.

Through the notions of 'sexual misconduct', individuals become socially isolated, stigmatised, and ridiculed for any performance of gender which deviates from the social norm. Therefore, whether one is a member of the LGBTQ community or not, he or she is still made to feel or bear the brunt of the consequences of heterosexism if their gender and sexual identity/practice is not aligned with traditional gendered expectations. These heteronormative notions often derive from religious ideals which, as this article has shown, have their roots in colonial contexts. While this article has drawn on dancehall lyrics as a primary source for understanding heterosexist discourses in Jamaica and T&T, there is a need for further research into how heterosexism is constructed and continues to prevail within these contexts.

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