Title
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Queens of the Dancehall and Rudegyals: Rasta Women and Reggae-Dancehall in Brazil

Seeing a female behind a microphone rhyming in original Rap and Dancehall style draws an image of passion and drive, as she performs with the strength and attitude to make her voice heard. With some brief fieldwork in Sao Paulo and Rio de Janeiro last summer, I experienced many live performances of a burgeoning community of Reggae-Dancehall artists. Of the twenty artists interviewed in southeast Brazil, including MC’s, musicians, and producers, only two were female rapper/singers. While there are a few other female artists in this musical scene, the two most widely recognized women are Lei Di Dai, the “rainha do dancehall” (queen of the dancehall) and Ivy, the only female member of 7Velas (candles). In retrospect, these two females stand out among the men and hold their own in the representation of a spectrum of perspectives and personalities connected to this modern urban music of the African Diaspora.

The Reggae-Dancehall sound system culture and Rastafarian spirituality originated in impoverished black communities in Jamaica and was mainly popularized during the 1970’s and 1980’s, eventually becoming an international phenomenon. The idea of an emerging underground appreciation of this music in the sound system culture in Brazil is an example the transnationalisation of music and representing identity through music and musical culture. Dancehall (Reggae-Dancehall and Ragga) has a certain adaptability and international appeal that has led to its popularization in Brazil, without any community of Jamaicans inhabiting the region. Tracey Skelton speaks of Dancehall culture as she states, “Ragga music is the culture of the ghetto, it speaks from the ghetto and it tells of ghetto existence. Further, the rhythms and performance of the music mean that it can transcend cultural and geographical boundaries and scales.”
(Skelton 1998:146). Sound system culture and Rastafarianism are translated into Portuguese with some Jamaican patwah (patois), and spoken through the Brazilian perspective, then distributed back out into the world of music. This form of transnationalisation is moving rapidly through cyberspace via Myspace and Youtube, allowing for artists to have control over the representation and distribution of their creations. Neither Ivy nor Lei Di Dai have an album out yet, but have utilized the Internet to spread their sounds, while Lei Di Dai’s songs are played on the radio throughout different states in Brazil, thereby receiving recognition and expanding her opportunities to perform in various venues.

In terms of the expression of gender in Dancehall music, “the dancehall, thus conceived, is an erogenous zone in which the celebration of female sexuality and fertility is ritualized…Indeed the joyous display of the female body in the dance is misperceived as a pornographic devaluation of woman” (Cooper 2004: 17). My interest in highlighting female performance in black urban music around the world stems from the inspired works of black female scholars concerning music, including Carolyn Cooper, who explores Lady Saw’s music and performance demonstrating spirituality and sexuality in the same space; Tracey Skelton, who provides an exploration of females in Dancehall and Ragga; Angela Davis who transcribes socio-cultural messages in lyrics and performances of women in the Blues, and Cheryl Keyes, who describes four major female artist personality archetypes in Rap music. I draw from in these works to compare, contrast, and discuss these two most popular Brazilian female Dancehall artists.

Female singers and rappers of the black urban community express dimensions of working class culture and give voice to the female perspective in a male-dominated and hyper-masculinized field of music. Cheryl Keyes refers to one of the female archetypes
of rap as Queen Mothers, who are the daughters of the Blues, and she states, “their rhymes embrace black female empowerment, spirituality, making clear their self-identification, as African, woman, warrior, priestess and queen” (Keyes 2002: 189). Lei Di Dai, the queen of the dancehall in Brazil comes with a “Ladies First” attitude and message like that of Queen Latifah in Rap. Both of these names or titles suggest names of strength and power, giving female audience members a powerful female iconic figure. Lei Di Dai, meaning law of Diane (Diane Nacimento), is pronounced like La – ji – die in Portuguese, similar sounding to Lady Diane in English and is reminiscent of her figurative mother of the Blues and Jazz, Lady Day (Billie Holliday).

Lei Di Dai gives a voice and presents images of power to the impoverished community of the ghetto thereby promoting transformation and development, especially by performing with the support band QG Imperial in the Roots, Ragga, Reggae – a free benefit concert of Reggae-Dancehall artists coming together to sing for the “ghetto youth” of southeast Brazil and around the world, connecting back to African communities. In her live performance, Lei Di Dai is one of the main artists in this particular scene who utilize call and response dialogue and participation with audiences, which is a major facet of musical traditions of the African Diaspora. Audience members commonly sing along with her lyrics, demonstrating admiration and respect, especially during the chorus of her most popular song “Original do gueto,” as she sings “Lei Di Dai, here from the east zone of São Paulo, daughter of a black man, original of the ghetto.” She also makes a statement in this song, “salary is minimum and maximum the pressure,” which directly speaks to the struggle of those poverty stricken in her own community. In her other songs she emphasizes individual and community strength and socially and
mentally uplifting messages such as in “Energia Positiva” (positive energy), where she sings of thoughts of equality, positivism, and praises to Jah Rastafari, and in another song “Essa é a Lei Di Dai” (This is Lei Di Dai), she describes her lyrical and performance prowess and strength.

Ivy, of 7Velas, is a strong female personality boasting her originality and talent onstage, while also using sensual dance moves and sexually revealing clothing to add to her stage performance. In contrast to Lei Di Dai, Ivy has other work to earn her income as a hair dresser/beautician, besides rapping and singing Reggae-Dancehall. In the song “Original style” she refers to herself as the rudegyal of Dancehall, which relates her to another of Cheryl Keyes’ female archetypes of Rap: “sistas with attitude” (Keyes 2002: 199). The sista with attitude is aggressive in challenging male authority, arrogant and tough, or in other words, a bad girl. Ivy embodies this rudegyal sista with attitude personality in her song “Punanny style.” She refers to “punnany” as in the female genitalia or a “pussy popping” type of dance involving gyration and flirtation.

An extremely important aspect of the Dancehall scene is the space for the freedom of diverse personal expression and many would argue it is a space mainly for the commoditization of women. Most contemporary movies, advertisements, commercials are already directed toward a youth market (aged 16-24) using the female body to sell products daily, which reflects the everyday patriarchal structures of many societies worldwide. Through this raunchy “punnany style,” Ivy has internalized sexist ideals concerning female exotification, as her lyrics contain a language of power through sexuality, much like modern day Dancehall artists Lady Saw or Tanya Stevens in their rudegyal Dancehall “slackness” (rough and tough attitude).
Lei Di Dai suggests good times and happiness without any explicit sexual material, while connecting to the roots of Reggae in her song “Dance Reggae.” In Ivy’s song “Velas Acesas” (candles inflamed), she definitively promotes herself and 7Velas while speaking to the eventual fall of Babylon with spitfire words of force, as she also does in her song of equality and peace, “Paz e união” (peace and union). It may seem that I set these two women as opposites in female perspective and personality, but as feminist scholar Angela Davis states, “it should not be assumed that social content can be present only when themes of love and sexuality are absent” (Davis: 162). The same artists who speak of love and sexuality may also promote characteristics of individuality and freedom. Both Ivy and Lei Di Day make their own lyrical choices and self-representation. However, Ivy’s performance demonstrates stereotypical female sexuality to counteract the hyper-masculinity of the predominantly male crew of 7Velas, while at the same time, her stage performance and presentation are her own choice.

Both of these female artists perform with strength of character and conviction. As a queen of a music scene, a woman is respected for her strong attitude, while she may also express diva-like tendencies. Bad girls or “sistas with attitude” promote individuality and acting against the status quo. Both are personalities expressing strength through a certain take-nothing-from-no-one embodiment, demonstrating or reconstructing this attitude and behavior to show their power in performance. In their very performance and creation of original lyrics, they are both contesting a one-sided representation of females in lyrical descriptions by men in a male-dominated musical culture.

Scholar Carolyn Cooper eludes to this rupturing of female gender roles and expression with the relation of female dancehall artists to deities of the African Diaspora. Oshun and Oya, some would argue are un-gendered Orishas (saints or deities) in the
syncrécic religions connecting Catholic and West African Yoruban religious practices, from Santaría in Cuba of the Caribbean to Candomblé of Brazil (Cooper 2004:105). Rastafarianism is another facet of Afrocentric spiritual and cultural expression, of which these two Brazilian dancehall artists speak. Cooper suggests that the fertility ritual of dancing has become a performance of gender role-play, putting on a show in which women are the center of attention and the male gaze, whether it be through a queenly presentation demanding respect or a rudegyal attitude of sex appeal and braggadocio.

Another similarity between Ivy and Lei Di Dai’s performance is that they work with mostly male musicians. Lei Di Dai creates her own opportunities with musicians QG Imperial, various DJ’s, and producers from Sao Paulo and Rio de Janeiro. The only Brazilian Dancehall band, QG Imperial, consists of four males, who accompany many different Reggae-Dancehall and Ragga artists. Lei Di Dai was featured with this band in a major article in the third issue of Rolling Stone Brazil. This article physically places her in front of QG Imperial in the photo as the “A verdadeira rainha do dancehall brasileiro” (the true queen of Brazilian dancehall). She claims that she would be nothing without QG Imperial and asked during the Rolling Stone interview to be featured in a picture with the group even though the article focuses on Lei Di Dai (Cruz: 2006).

Lei Di Dai also works with all male DJ’s (selectas) and production crews such as Digitaldubs Sound System, who are three males specializing in the incorporation of Brazilian musical forms such as Baile Funk with Reggae-Dancehall, making unique and original riddims (rhythms) for artists to lay their own lyric tracks over. Lei Di Dai is the only Brazilian female artist featured on one of their compilations, Diaspora Riddim, with her song “Original do gueto.” Ivy is always featured in performances with the other four male members of the group 7Velas. She is also romantically linked with Jimmy Luv,
local dancehall celebrity MC and producer of 7Velas. 7Velas also performs with the band QG Imperial, thereby surrounding these women with male artists.

Dancehall music expresses Diaspora politics in terms of the spread of a local form of music, production style, and culture from Jamaica to Brazil to the United States. Black feminist scholar Tricia Rose comments on, “the mobility of sound and sound technologies…this is especially clear in the development and significance of Jamaican sound systems that transmit anticolonial black identity and politics by incorporating the “downpressor’s” latest technologies” (Rose 1997:267). The DJ turntable sound systems of Dancehall, or the use of the Internet, enable self-representation in which one can broadcast oneself to the world through loud-speaker and cyberspace technologies. This serves to further stir up dialogue concerning (re)presentation of the sistas and queens, through the medium of music and modern mass communication technology.