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Affective cosmopolitanisms in Singapore: Dancehall and the decolonisation of the self

Accepted for publication in *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers.* The information, practices and views in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the opinion of the Royal Geographical Society (with IBG).

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Article type: Regular paper

Abstract: This paper advances a new understanding of cosmopolitanism; one that is rooted in the affective potential of the body. It argues that whilst the self is often projected onto the body, so too can the body play an important role in (re)imagining the self. As such, the body can decolonise the self from the mind, from the expectations of society and culture, and from the normative epistemological underpinnings of academic knowledge production. I validate these theoretical arguments through an empirical focus on the practice of dancehall in Singapore. Dancehall is an emancipatory cultural movement that emerged in Jamaica in the late-1970s, and, amongst other things, has become known for its sexually provocative representation of the human body. Singapore, on the other hand, is a conservative Asian city-state in which cosmopolitan self-fashioning is an elite, top-down process imparted by the government and educational system. By reconciling dancehall culture in/and the Singapore context, I explore how Singaporean youths forge new, more affective, forms of cosmopolitan self-realisation. Through dancehall, they learn how to engage with the self on their own terms, and thus realise new ways of being in the world.

Acknowledgments: Thanks to Nigel Lopez for fieldwork assistance, the anonymous reviewers for

Accepted Article

This article has been accepted for publication and undergone full peer review but has not been through the copyediting, typesetting, pagination and proofreading process, which may lead to differences between this version and the Version of Record. Please cite this article as doi: 10.1111/TRAN.12407

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constructive engagement with an earlier version of this paper, and Patricia Noxolo for editorial guidance.

Funding information: There are no funders to report for this submission

Data availability statement: The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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Article type : Regular Paper

1 INTRODUCTION

Cosmopolitanism is a way of being in, and engaging with, the world. It is a modality of existence that is grounded in and by the body, and which informs how we understand ourselves, and how we relate to others. Cosmopolitanism therefore provides a conceptual lens through which the complex, and sometimes paradoxical, relationship between the body and the self, in/and society, can be explored and understood. To assume that the self and the body exist in a constant state of synchrony is to overlook the many and varied forces that contribute to the shaping of the self. The self is a contingent construct that is defined in relation to socio-cultural norms; as such, it is liable to colonisation by the ideals and expectations of others. Accordingly, the cognitive underpinnings of self-understanding and identification may not necessarily cohere with the feelings, or the affective sensibilities, of the body. Learning about the self through the body provides an ontological departure from cognitive self-understandings, the value of which is that it can 'dismantle something of the concept [of cosmopolitanism] … in ways that gesture towards alternative ways of being, thinking, and living together in radical alterity' (Jazeel, 2011: 77). By engaging with Delanty's (2006: 38, 42) view that 'the term cosmopolitanism signals a condition of self-confrontation' that can be an expression of 'more reflexive kinds of self-understanding', this paper explores how the affective potential of the body can lead to new understandings of the cosmopolitan self.

I forge such understandings through an empirical focus on the practice of dancehall in Singapore. Dancehall is a cultural movement – defined by distinctive styles of music, dance,

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attitude and dress – that emerged in the urban ghettoes of Kingston, Jamaica in the late-1970s. Since then, dancehall has 'traversed boundaries of the street, the area or community, the nation, and the Jamaican Diaspora… to occupy global sound and dance scapes' (Stanley-Niaah, 2004a: 123). Through such boundary-crossing, dancehall can be seen as resolutely cosmopolitan in appeal. Not only is cosmopolitanism a defining feature of dancehall culture, but so too is the fact that 'dancehall style revolves around and is expressed by the body' (Stanley-Niaah, 2004b: 113). These defining features illustrate the value of dancehall in helping to develop new understandings of cosmopolitanism self-fashioning. Indeed, just as dance can be a 'poetic and powerfully embodied way of being-with-others' (Bakare-Yusuf, 2005: 263), so too can the practice of dancehall 'move people to feel that they have a connection with other people and other places' (Henriques, 2008: 216; also Henriques, 2010; Woods, 2019, 2020a). Whilst these characteristics resonate with practitioners of dancehall around the world, they are acutely felt in Singapore, where the body tends to be colonised by the mind, and the mind inscribed by the idea(l)s of society. In other words, in Singapore, individuals have traditionally been expected to subordinate the self to the rationalities of the government, and the ethno-religious communities to which they belong. Exploring dancehall culture in Singapore can therefore provide empirical insight into how affective cosmopolitanisms can enable the decolonisation of the self.

In this paper, I argue that cosmopolitanism is something that can be learnt through open engagement with the body. The body can enable a *feeling* of cosmopolitanism, meaning affective cosmopolitanisms can be understood as embodied forms of cosmopolitan self-awakening. Engagement of this sort is often a response to an affective experience; one in which the self is freed from the inscriptions of society and culture, and empowered to explore new ways of being in the world. To the extent that the body represents feeling and emotion, through the 'universal laws of movement' (Chakravorty, 2009: 214) it can be seen to unite people that may otherwise be marked as different. The body contains, in other words, an innate potential to *be* cosmopolitan. Identifying the body as a locus of cosmopolitan awakening is 'fundamentally different from the dominant Western epistemologies of visual analysis of cognition and perception' (Chakravorty, 2004: 1) and thus aligns with recent calls to "mainstream" decolonial knowledges (Jazeel, 2017; Radcliffe, 2017). Cosmopolitanism is an important field from which such a decolonising agenda can be launched, as 'the 'cosmos' of cosmopolitanism is no geographically innocent signifier' (Jazeel, 2011: 75). In many respects, cosmopolitanism remains 'irredeemably European' (Jazeel, 2011: 75), with this

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paper providing a decolonising counterpoint to its 'surreptitiously imperial' (Brennan, 2001: 81) underpinnings.

With these ideas in mind, the decolonising agenda of this paper is threefold. First, and in the broadest sense, it offers an alternative understanding of cosmopolitanism that 'encourages re-thinking the world *from* Latin America, *from* Africa, *from* Indigenous places and *from* the marginalised academia in the global South' (Radcliffe, 2017: 329, original emphasis). My empirical focus on a distinctly Afro-Caribbean cultural export – dancehall – aligns with such rethinking, not least because 'the wider context of dancehall's social, spatial, and cultural topography remains underexposed' (Stanley-Niaah, 2004b: 104). This focus is sharpened by contextualising dancehall in Singapore, where it remains a marginal, and, in many respects, provocative practice. Second, in its focus on the body as the basis of the awakening of the cosmopolitan self, it attempts to decolonise the self from the prescriptions and expectations of society and culture. In the context of Singapore, the hegemonic nature of such prescriptions serves to highlight the emancipatory nature of embodied self-awakening. Third, in embracing embodied forms of intelligence in the formation of affective cosmopolitanism, this paper rebalances the existing focus on cognitive forms of knowledge production. It heralds the embodied self as a new way of understanding the cosmopolitan self, and thus foregrounds the emergence of new ways of being in the world.

2 THE COLONISING IMPULSES OF COSMOPOLITANISM

For a long time, cosmopolitanism has captured the imaginations of scholars. The popularity of the concept stems from the fact that it speaks to, and provides a method to manage and overcome, the socio-cultural complexity that has come to define the contemporary world. Conceptually it is positioned in-between, and as a mediator for, different oppositional pairings – such as global-local, self-other, open-closed – that are commonly deployed to classify and understand unfolding shifts in society. In light of these observations, understandings of cosmopolitanism have come a long way from being 'an intellectual and aesthetic stance of openness toward divergent cultural experiences' (Hannerz, 1990: 239; also Delanty, 2006). On the one hand, it is a practical response to (growing) socio-cultural diversity around the world. On the other, it is a strategic tool that underpins visions of an idealised, global citizen for the twenty first century. In this latter view, cosmopolitanism has been studied as a form of social and cultural capital that can be taught, learnt, and converted into economic gain (Mitchell, 2003; Hörschelmann and El Refaie, 2014; Woods and Kong,

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2020a). The conversion value of cosmopolitanism is predicated on the 'strategic use of diversity for competitive advantage in the global marketplace' (Mitchell, 2003: 387), and has caused it to be a vehicle through which neoliberal ideals can be reproduced by governments and educational systems, and entrenched within societies. Whilst there are various ways in which 'people acquire and express cosmopolitanism' (Igarashi and Saito, 2014: 222), these acquisitions and expressions commonly materialise as diversity in social and professional networks, consumption practices, and lifestyle choices. There is, however, an ongoing need to develop new, and implicitly more critical, understandings of how cosmopolitanism is defined, where it is located, and how it is deployed to position individuals in the world.

Discourses of cosmopolitanism are variously implicated in the (re)production of power and control. Amongst other things, they have been deployed as a positioning tool that is used to define and demarcate difference, and to locate the cosmopolitan self in relation to (and typically above) others. These deployments coalesce into two distinct perspectives, the reconciliation of which reveals the colonising impulses of cosmopolitanism. On the one hand, acquiring cosmopolitan sensibilities can lead to the strategic positioning of privileged individuals in ways 'that can be used to extend opportunities or consolidate power' (Jeffrey and McFarlane, 2008: 420). On the other hand, such positionings can lead to social differentiation, the (re)production of class-based divisions, and the resulting 'exclu[sion of] those who do not or are unable to possess it' (Cheng, 2018: 154; after Harvey, 2009). Reconciling these two articulations of cosmopolitanism reveals a paradox in which the positioning of individuals as cosmopolitans can serve to reproduce various forms of inequality in the world. Igarashi and Saito (2014: 228) develop this argument further, by identifying the geographical unevenness with which cosmopolitanism is acquired. They observe how people 'who were born and grew up in the West' have an implicit advantage when 'acquir[ing] cosmopolitanism as cultural capital because academic qualifications that are only local or national for them are simultaneously regarded as global by people in the non-West'. By locating cosmopolitanism geographically, and by identifying how it can be deployed as a positioning tool, the colonising impulses of cosmopolitanism-as-discourse manifest.

Critical scholarship has attempted to rebut these impulses by relocating and redefining cosmopolitanism in different empirical contexts around the world. The emergence of "subaltern" and "everyday" cosmopolitanisms reflects the 'growing eagerness to foray into

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small town and rural settings for compelling and intimate forms of cosmopolitanism' (Zeng, 2014: 138) that consider the 'reflexive openness people perform to get along with each other' (Plage et al., 2017: 4; e.g. Gidwani, 2006; Mitchell, 2007; Jeffrey and McFarlane, 2008). These "forays" have led to a pluralisation of the discourse, with critical research identifying and explicating the multiple pathways and outcomes that can lead to becoming "cosmopolitan". Pluralisation can, in this sense, be understood as a response to the critiques that 'cosmopolitanism is too frequently defined in scalar terms, where the 'global' is assumed to supersede and encompass the local, regional and national' (Hörschelmann and El Refaie, 2014: 444), which has, as a result, produced a discourse that is 'anchored on an imaginary celebration of difference' (Ho, 2011: 731). Relocating and redefining cosmopolitanism from an alternative scalar perspective has helped destabilise the power relations that underpin normative understandings of what it means to be cosmopolitan. My contention, however, is that such alternative perspectives and pathways are often implicated in the same structures of power that they attempt to destabilise. In recognition of this dynamic, Jazeel (2011: 77, original emphasis) warns that:

> Attempts to pluralize our understandings of cosmopolitanism ultimately serve to reinstantiate the liberalism, rationalities and taxonomies of thought that are tethered to the concept's irredeemably European and universalizing set of values and human normativities. In other words, cosmopolitanism's pluralization does little to open a Eurocentric critical intellectual imagination up to differences *not* proscribed by a centre that sets the parameters for difference.

Jazeel's intervention provides a timely reminder of the epistemological assumptions that underpin cosmopolitanism-as-discourse; assumptions that, in various and subtle ways, are reproduced within the critical scholarship outlined above. It is in this vein that I offer a reimagination of cosmopolitanism as a counterpoint to the normative "European critical intellectual imagination" that Jazeel condemns. In doing so, I advance a new understanding of embodied forms of cosmopolitanism that can be triggered by affective experiences. Importantly, these forms are "*not* proscribed by a centre that sets the parameters for difference". Rather, they are the moments of cosmopolitan self-realisation that can emerge through open engagement with the affective potential of the body. Affective cosmopolitanisms thus consider the ways in which the self can learn to be cosmopolitan by realising a sense of open engagement with the (affect[ive/ed]) body. They are a conceptual

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response to the need to reimagine cosmopolitanism in a way that circumvents its colonising impulses. This reimagination involves two, inter-related, features. The first is that their affective nature foregrounds a (re)focussing of attention on the body as the *locus* of cosmopolitan awakening, meaning affected bodies can lead to the realisation of cosmopolitan selves. The second is that, through such (re)focussing, we can speak from a position rooted in the epistemological traditions of the non-West. These traditions tend to emphasise the intelligence of the body, and thus provide an analytical lens through which the ways in which the body and mind/self may converge or contradict each other can be understood. More importantly, we can also explore how each can *shape* the other through open engagement. With these ideas in mind, I now introduce the decolonising impulses of dancehall, and its potential to realise embodied forms of cosmopolitanism self-awakening.

3 DANCEHALL AND THE DECOLONISATION OF THE SELF

Dancehall[1] emerged in Kingston, Jamaica in the late-1970s, and has since evolved into a global cultural phenomenon that is defined by its music, dress, movements, language and attitude. Originally associated with Kingston's inner-city ghetto communities, dancehall can be understood as a response to the lack of socio-economic opportunity, cultural conservatism, political constraints, and, with the death of Bob Marley in 1981, the diminution of Rastafarian-inspired spirituality and Judeo-Christian moral values within Jamaican popular music[2]. As such, dancehall has come to be seen as a form of socio-cultural rebellion that has since enabled the emancipation and empowerment of the marginal communities from which it emerged. Aesthetically, dancehall is a rejection of middle-class Jamaican sensibilities, with 'the apparent guttural unintelligibility of Dancehall music together with the 'bare-as-you-dare' fashion and overtly sexual movement of dancers' being 'perceived by the ruling class as the antithesis of culture and civilization' (Bakare-Yusuf, 2005: 266). It provides a method

[1] "Dancehall" can also refer to a physical venue wherein dances are held (literally a "hall" for "dance").

[2] According to Stanley-Niaah (2009: 761), this opened the 'floodgate for lyrics about women's body parts, sexuality and male sexual prowess, and increasingly, violence'.

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of performance, style, attitude and identity through which 'hegemonic attitudes are destabilized' (Pinnock, 2007: 48) and the self is decolonised from the expectations and inscriptions of power. As Stanley-Niaah (2004b: 103) puts it, dancehall:

> tells the story of a people's survival and need for celebration of that survival against forces of imperialism and systems of exclusion through dance, music, and attitude. Dancehall's story is ultimately the choregraphing of an identity that critiques aspects of Western domination.

These "aspects of Western domination" are a legacy of British colonialism that were, and, in many respects, continue to be, reproduced through the expectations and aspirations of Jamaica's middle and upper classes. In this vein, dancehall can be seen to 're-read (Western) capitalist celebrations of a generic Euro-centric ideal which devalues all who do not fit into its idealized, ethnocentric imagery' (Pinnock, 2007: 49). Specifically, the performance of the gendered self plays a central role in what Pinnock (2007) describes as the "decolonizing narrative" of dancehall. Through dancehall, gender is performed in ways that 'mock, exaggerate and re-create the Europeanized cult of femininity through strategies of vulgarized mimicry and over-dramatized commentary on ideal femininity' (Bakare-Yusuf, 2005: 268). Dancehall normalises difference, providing a performative channel through which people can embrace who they really are. The visual aesthetic of dancehall has thus become that of a 'dark-skinned, overweight, Afro-Jamaican woman dressed in tight, revealing and/or garish costumes, with large amounts of gold jewellery and elaborate hairstyle – all of which negates the traditional conventions of Eurocentric beauty that obtain in Jamaica' (Hope, 2004: 106). Through such embodied distinctions, dancehall empowers its practitioners to (re)assert a degree of control over their identities, their selves, and their position in society. The body, then, is used to 'assert a new sense of self, a sense of freedom that [i]s reflected in the beat and tempo of the music and dance' (Stanley-Niaah, 2009: 759). In doing so, the body also valorises the deep-rooted oral traditions that have long defined Jamaican popular culture, and thus provides a cognitive counterpoint to the intellectual traditions of the West (Cooper, 1995).

Beyond the visual aesthetics of the body, the movements of dancehall add another layer of meaning through which a new sense of self can be forged. Whilst the visual aesthetics of dancehall serve to embrace, exaggerate and distort the female body, so too do the movements

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revel in its sexuality. As a style of dance, dancehall has come to represent an 'exhilarating frankness with which women have come to celebrate sexuality' (Sterling, 2006: 3), with Henriques (2008: 227) describing how 'the dancing is literally bottom-up with its signature 'bumper-grinding' sexually explicit choreography, where the bass note is struck by the body itself – displaying its fecundity and celebrating its fertility'. When dancing dancehall, the focus is on the pelvis; common movements include "wining" (gyrating the hips), "twerking" (thrusting the hips back and forth in a sexually provocative way), and "daggering" (simulating sexual acts between male and female dancers). Movements like these define the "slackness[3]" with which dancehall has come to be associated. Yet, in doing so, they can also be seen to liberate the body from the prescriptions of socio-cultural mores, and to realise an implicitly more self-directed understanding of the cosmopolitan self. Dancers are encouraged to engage with the primal, sexual nature of the human body without judgment or criticism; indeed, they perform gendered caricatures that see males adopt the role of "kings" and females of "queens". As Stanley-Niaah (2004a: 124) notes, 'the idea of "queen" as a category… reveals the consistently elevated place of woman as a key counterpart of the male "king"', which suggests both the symbiosis of roles, but also the heteronormative expectations of such gendered expressions. These expectations stem from the fact that

> 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 (Brown, 1999: 10).

Jamaican dancehall culture reproduces these "construction[s]" and "condemn[ations]", in sometimes extreme ways. Buju Banton's song Boom Bye-Bye, released in 1992, calls for the shooting and burning of homosexuals, whilst other dancehall artists like Beenie Man,

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[3] "Slackness" generally refers to someone's sexual proclivity, although it has been theorised in more expansive terms by Cooper (2004: 3-4) as a 'radical… confrontation with the patriarchal gender ideology and the duplicitous morality of fundamentalist Jamaican society… [it] is the antithesis of restrictive uppercase Culture'.

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Elephant Man and Sizzla (to name but a prominent few) have also received public criticism (and in some cases, censure) through similar expressions of violent homophobia in their lyrics. Whilst these examples reflect a thread of extreme conservatism that runs through Jamaican dancehall, the fact remains that dancehall reproduces rigid expressions of gendered sexuality more generally. Thus, as much as dancehall provides a space through which individuals can explore who they are, or who they want to be, these embodied freedoms are reproduced within a distinctly enculturated framework of what "freedom" actually means. Freedom is defined in terms of sexual expression, and within a framework of heteronormative gender roles. This framework is not necessarily observed in Singapore (in some cases, it is actively subverted), meaning the embodied freedoms of dancehall can become potentially problematic points of negotiation with the cosmopolitan (Singaporean) self. Through these negotiations, the body becomes a space that intersects with, and thus moderates, ideas of freedom and prescription, enculturation and affect; it is the space through which Jamaican dancehall is translated and reimagined in response to the local context in which it is practiced (Cooper, 2004). Before exploring these ideas further, I first introduce the broader context of dancehall in Singapore, and methodology.

4 AFFECTIVE COSMOPOLITANISMS IN SINGAPORE

Singapore is an Asian city-state that can be defined by its multi-ethnic population, its rapid economic development, and its authoritarian (and pragmatic) government. These three factors inform the normative definitions and practices of cosmopolitanism in Singapore. In the first instance, the Singapore population is majority Chinese, but with significant minority groups of Malays, Indians and Others. As an outcome of such ethnic diversity, Singapore is also multi-religious, with religion interlinked with ethnicity most noticeably amongst the Malay-Muslim population. Managing such ethno-religious diversity underpins the need for Singapore citizens to have, at some level, an understanding and acceptance of difference in order to maintain socio-cultural harmony. Moreover, Singapore is a conservative country in which ethno-religious traditions play a prescriptive role in the formation of community and identity (Kong and Woods, 2019; Woods and Kong, 2020b). In the second and third instances (which are inter-related), Singapore's economic development has been rapid, and has caused it to become a regional and global hub for business. This global positioning has resulted in a 'state discourse of cosmopolitanism [that] is highly engineered and deeply embedded in the logics of neoliberal economic globalisation' (Cheng, 2018: 156). To this effect, in 1999 the

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term "cosmopolis" was coined, the aim being to formalise the government's 'corporatist and elitist view of cosmopolitan citizenship' (Cheng, 2018: 153). In response, criticism has been directed at the fact that state-engineered projects of cosmopolitanism are economically-motivated, underpinned by the need for ethno-religious harmony, and contribute to the "real subsumption of life" in Singapore (Hardt and Negri, 2009). I return to these ideas below.

Within this context of ethno-religious diversity, socio-cultural conservatism, and cosmopolitan elitism, dancehall occupies a surprising, oppositional and provocative cultural niche. Unlike in many other contexts in which dancehall is practiced, Singapore has no Jamaican (or Afro-Caribbean) diasporic community of note. Whereas in the UK and US, for example, dancehall emerged through diasporic communities, in Singapore it was imported. This occurred approximately ten years ago, when a Singaporean dancer called Claire[4] – a pioneer of Singapore's dancehall scene, and interviewee – returned home after working as a professional background dancer in the US. Amongst other artists, she also supported the acclaimed Jamaican dancehall artist, Sean Paul. As a result of this experience, she began to "explore the dancehall vibe", and started teaching it upon her return to Singapore. Since then, Singapore's dancehall community has grown to approximately 50-80 regular dancers, reflecting a range of levels of personal investment in (and identification with) dancehall culture. Many members of the community came to dancehall after experimenting with other genres – usually Malay dance or ballet, followed by street jazz and hip hop – with dancehall providing a culmination of self-exploration through dance. It is for these reasons that I decided to focus on dancehall – as a global performance tradition that has nonetheless emerged through a distinctly and idiosyncratically Singaporean interpretation of the "embodied freedoms" that it can bring. It appeals most to youths aged 18-25, especially polytechnic students. These students can, in the Singapore context, be defined as "non-elite", as they are more likely to work towards vocational qualifications than their university-educated counterparts. They do, in other words, represent a cohort that is positioned outside of the normative vision of cosmopolitan citizenship imposed by the state, and have thus been shown to forge their own cosmopolitan sensibilities, practices and politics in response.

[4] All names have been changed to ensure anonymity.

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Despite being a British researcher who lived in London until moving to Singapore in 2006, my interest in dancehall was, somewhat ironically (given the UK's prominent place in dancehall culture globally), triggered through immersion in Singapore's reggae subculture. The subculture was originally organised through Singapore's first and most prominent reggae soundsystem, Dub Skank'in Hifi, but has since expanded through the Singapura Dub Club – a community platform dedicated to promoting bass music culture in Singapore and Southeast Asia. By attending events – ranging from small, regular dances to larger-scale performances at the Singapore Night Festival, for example – I developed an awareness of the local dancehall community. The community has an iceberg-like structure, with few public figures – exceptions include MAS1A (a Singaporean/Canadian recording artist) and Ragga Wakas (a Singaporean dance crew) – but many more dancers that prefer to experiment with dancehall in the privacy of the dance studio. From this awareness, I began to appreciate dancehall's unique place in Singapore society, and to formulate the research questions used to structure this project. From this awareness, I also decided to use interviews rather than a practice-led approach, as I realised the need to try to understand the many paradoxes that underpin the practice of dancehall in Singapore. These include the ways in which dancehall intersects with the self in/and society, the problems that emerge from attempting to reconcile free bodies and prescribed minds, and the enculturated normativities that distinguish Jamaican and Singaporean dancehall. Through the generation of in-depth, personal narratives, I was able to work through these paradoxes in conversation with my participants.

Between September and December 2018, I conducted nineteen interviews with representatives of Singapore's dancehall community. The sample was relatively evenly split in terms of ethnicity (ten Chinese, eight Malay, one Malay-Filipino) and gender (eleven males, eight females). It was, however, imbalanced in terms of educational status, with seventeen participants being polytechnic educated (eight were currently working in occupations that ranged from dance instructor to retail assistant; nine were still students), and two being university students. Most participants were aged 18-25, although three were in their late-20s, and two in their mid-30s. These skews reflect the youthful, non-elite status of the dancehall community in Singapore. The three subsections that follow draw on these data to illustrate the role of dancehall in enabling the performance of affective cosmopolitanism in Singapore.

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4.1 Prescribed Singaporean youths

Youths around the world live prescribed lives that are, to greater or lesser degrees, governed by their parents, their teachers, and the broader socio-cultural communities in which they are implicated. In Singapore, these prescriptions are acutely felt, as ethno-religious associations play a prominent role in determining the values, attitudes and behaviours that youths are expected to adhere to. In various ways, the state reinforces these determinations. For example, the pragmatic and authoritarian impulses of the state are often reproduced within Chinese families, amongst whom hard work, wealth and filial piety are highly valued. Ren, a dancehall instructor and one of the pioneers of Singapore's dancehall scene, explained that "Chinese families have the hierarchy that is so strong", meaning expectations of the self are defined and imparted in a top-down way through the family. Edwin, a Chinese university student in his mid-20s, revealed what this means. First, he shared how his parents are "more traditional approach *lah*[5]… studying hard, more conservative", before going on to explain how "when I first started dancing… my parents were, like, 'why are you dancing? Can you earn money?'". Here, Edwin reveals how the value of dancing is not recognised by his parents, causing them to question why he pursues it. Time spent dancing detracts from time spent studying (or working), meaning dance is seen as an opportunity cost that negatively impacts the economic value of the self. In broader terms, this reveals the extent to which Singaporean youths are embedded within 'neoliberal modes of (self)governance' wherein 'any way of life that does not fit, or cannot be made to fit, with that form is devalued' (Anderson, 2012: 38, 39; after Hardt and Negri, 2009). Ahmad, a Malay polytechnic student in his mid-20s, reiterated and expanded this idea, explaining how

> in Singapore, all we think of is money… People's questions… until this day, they question 'dance can bring you far *meh*?', 'you go for classes, you waste your money, that's all you do what, is it worth it?'… Stuff like that. I think that's the hardest thing. The hardest thing is to make them understand that this is a platform that makes us feel good about ourselves.

[5] Suffixes like *lah* and *meh* are "Singlish" (Singaporean English) expressions that are commonly used in Singapore. I have retained them for honesty of expression.

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The "them" that Ahmad refers to is multi-layered, and can apply to parents, peers and society more broadly. As such, it reveals the multi-layered prescriptions that limit more individualised, and self-directed, explorations of the self. His admission that dancehall is a "platform that makes us feel good about ourselves" does, however, contrast with these prescriptions; accordingly, it is "the hardest thing" to negotiate. These negotiations were particularly difficult for Malay youths, as the Islamic values reproduced within Malay families underpin rigidly gendered, and heteronormative, understandings of thought and action. Zul, a Malay-Filipino in his late-20s, who worked in the service industry and openly identified as gay, provided insight into this tension, recalling how "my dad is a man's man, he always viewed dancing as something very effeminate". He went on to explain how his father would encourage him to embody a more masculine persona – "he would try to tell me to stop, 'don't stand that way', 'don't put your hand this way', 'don't fling your hand', 'don't talk like that', 'what's wrong with your speech?'" – which resulted in him admitting that "I feel like I'm living a lie". The "lie" of which Zul speaks encapsulates the tension he feels from having to negotiate the ethno-religious prescriptions of his Malay-Muslim father, with his homosexual self. For him, and others, dancehall is a channel through which he can engage with his true self. This sentiment was echoed by Aisha, a Malay polytechnic student in her late-teens, who admitted that dancehall is "a way of how I've been coping with my life lately… it's just a way to escape… [It's a] thing I genuinely want to do". She went on to explain these ideas, observing how, in Singapore

> [life] is very structured. It's like you have a certain expectation to achieve… After this, you have to do this, you know? You have a certain image that you have to bring everywhere, and you have to maintain it. Your image and reputation, it really matters a lot in Singapore. But dancehall gives us the chance to be anything you want to be. It allows us to bring out the inner… I don't know. Like someone else that we wouldn't want to be in our daily life.

Aisha's admission that dancehall "bring[s] out the inner…" hints at the role of the body in overcoming the prescriptions of socio-cultural norms, and in realising a new sense of the self. Indeed, the centrality of the body in dancehall provides a stark contrast to normative understandings and treatments of the Singaporean body. As Elle, a Chinese university student in her early-20s, explained: "I think it's the culture, the upbringing… we are traditional, we don't even touch each other". Dancehall provides a way for Singaporean youths to engage

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with their bodies, and with each other, through performance. Dancehall thus empowers them to overcome the prescriptions of society and culture, and, in doing so, to decolonise the self.

4.2 Embodied encounters with the decolonised self

The embodied practices of dancehall are a method by which dancers can encounter a new sense of the self. Because this new sense of the self is distinct from – and often in opposition to – that prescribed by socio-cultural norms of Singapore, it can be understood as a decolonised version of the self. These encounters are profoundly impactful. For most dancers, it was the first time they had experienced such an embodied way of being. For example, Elle recalled how the first time she experienced dancehall, "it changed my life. It really changed my life… I felt something… I felt stirred". Feeling "stirred" highlights the idea that dancehall can trigger something within the body; it is a method 'to feel, to emote, and to enjoy the freedom of [the] body, as they dance themselves into a feeling state' (Bakare-Yusuf, 2005: 270). For some people, this "feeling state" was easier to access than for others; an observation that speaks to the varying degrees of prescription that each individual is subjected to. For Zul, it was a gradual process of embodied self-realisation – "it's like… innate. I don't know. But it takes a long time for it to come out in you" – whereas for Claire, introduced above, it was more accessible: "it clicks in your body, your body understands the moves… there are teachers who say 'dancehall chose me', I feel that's what they kind of mean because it's in your body". The importance of such encounters is that they provide a new perspective from which the self can be realised. Aisha explained the importance of this:

> [In Singapore] we don't really get the chance to be emotional. You have to maintain this… 'yeah, okay, we're working hard'… Dancehall just really allows us to express what we really want to do, what we really want to say, what we really want to prove, you know?

In Singapore, where overt displays of emotion are often suppressed, dancehall provides a channel for honest and emotive expression. It allows dancers to tap into the 'expressive armoury of the human body' (Thrift, 2014: 182), and, in doing so, to realise a decolonised version of the self. Ness (1992: 5, original emphasis) argues that embodied forms of movement, such as dance, provide channels through which such realisation can occur, as 'nobody, "no-body", can learn an unfamiliar neuromuscular pattern without being willing to acquire a new and perhaps startling insight into who it is they actually are – that is to say, *a*

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truly plural being or figure'. In the eyes of my interviewees, what separated dancehall from other genres of dance was the fact that "you need to be very open" (Edwin) in order to realise this plurality of being. This contrasted with other forms of dance, such as hip hop, which was described as being more precise and controlled in its movements. Amongst my Malay interviewees, dancehall was a stark contrast to traditional forms of Malay cultural dance that many were exposed to when growing up. Aisha outlined the distinction:

> Malay dance is very restricting, it's very structured… I mean, I enjoyed the techniques and everything and it brings out the grace of Malay females, but I wanted something more. I wanted to try more stuff. I can do more things with my body… [With dancehall] you tend to use different parts of your body that you never know that you could. And you tend to explore more within yourself.

In this sense, whilst both Malay dance and dancehall can both be seen as encultured and embodied, Malay dance strives to control (and, therefore, colonise) the body through prescribed movements, whereas dancehall strives to free the body from such prescriptions. Rather than trying to replicate specific patterns of pre-defined movements, dancehall causes the body to become 'a kind of metronome through which the individual can sense the diverse and sometimes discordant rhythms of which everyday life consists' (McCormack, 2008: 1828). In other words, embodied encounters with the decolonised self help to illuminate the stark contrast between the decolonised and prescribed selves. Imran, a Malay polytechnic student in his late-teens, stated how "at this point of time and age, I'm at this exploring myself stage, and trying to know who I am better [through dancehall]", whilst Edwin shared how "when I do dancehall, I feel very liberated". This principle of openness to the body is integral to the decolonisation of the self. As Bourdieu (1977: 79) reminds us, 'it is because subjects do not, strictly speaking, know what they are doing that what they do has more meaning than they know'. Whilst the self is invariably influenced by extraneous forces, the body relies more primarily on feeling, the implication being that 'through our emotion, we reach back sensually to grasp the tacit, embodied *foundations of ourselves*' (Katz, 1999: 7; emphasis added). The extent to which these foundations can be engaged can in turn reveal the extent to which the self is decolonised from both the mind, and the broader socio-cultural frameworks within which we live.

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That said, as much as the decolonised self provides an emancipatory, and more self-directed, way of being in the world, it could take time to come to terms with. The free, provocative, and often sexualised, movements of dancehall could lead to the realisation of disjunctures between the (prescribed) mind and (decolonised) body, as affect can 'increase or decrease in the ability of the body and mind alike to act' (Thrift, 2007: 178). Ren, introduced above, explained how learning dancehall "did push my boundaries in terms of understanding my body… I feel my understanding of the body expanded". Whilst Ren provides a relatively objective insight into her "expanded" understanding of the body, Cheryl, a working professional in her mid-20s, was more candid in her admission that "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 interviewees. Tariq, a Malay polytechnic student in his late-teens, shared a more profound insight into the "weirdness" described by Cheryl. He explained how "your body feels different when you dance… it's something foreign… It's something that makes us [the dancehall community] different from the rest [of Singapore]". This excerpt reveals two important insights into Tariq's relationship between his body and his self. The first is that his body feels "foreign" when dancing dancehall, which, paradoxically, reveals the extent to which it has been colonised by his mind and socio-cultural norms[6]. The second is that, in his efforts to decolonise his body through dancehall, he is someone "different from the rest". This difference encapsulates a refusal to comply with the prescriptions of his Malay-Muslim identity, and to realise a more individual and autonomous version of himself instead.

Whilst the tensions that emerge from the mind-body disjuncture were often negotiated internally, they also reveal the overarching framework of cultural conservatism that dancehall is worked through in Singapore. This framework causes Singaporean dancehall to often be performed in more tentative ways than it may be in other contexts, or by other people. This is especially true for dancehall's sexual mores. Edwin, for example, observed how "one of the biggest obstacles for 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

[6] The names of two of the dance crews that some of my interviewees represented – *Slay Empire* and *Foreign Bodies* – reveal a profound understanding of this reality.

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the less sexualised ones". This avoidance stems from the overarching concern that "other dancers will perceive [judge] you". The limits of decolonisation can therefore be seen to reflect the extent to which Singaporean bodies can be re-racialised through their adoption of Caribbean-centric patterns of movement. These limits were acutely felt when Jamaican dancehall instructors visited Singapore to give workshops. Cheryl explained how, during one of these visits,

> everyone ha[d] 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 [to it], 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.

As mentioned above, daggering reflects some of the more extreme movements of dancehall; movements that, as Cheryl mentions, "we don't do" in Singapore. In this vein, as much as embodied freedoms give dancers a taste of the decolonised self, these freedoms become more relative constructs when other, apparently *freer*, individuals are encountered. Decolonisation, as a result, is a process that is difficult to complete; it is usually a state of becoming that is indexed to the space-times of performance, and the relativising effects that come with encountering other (non-Singaporean) bodies. Ren reiterated Cheryl's sentiment, explaining "that's how people [in Singapore] have been brought up, you know, men respecting women" before sharing how "this guy [the Jamaican instructor] was like, the king, and all the women around him have to be, like…". Her unfinished sentence reveals the reservation that Ren (and others) felt when encountering a Jamaican king; a reservation rooted in the tension between her body and mind. Whilst her body was expected to respond to his in accordance with the performative expressions of dancehall, she was prevented from doing so according to the "respect" that defines the terms of inter-personal contact in Singapore. For Zul, introduced above, it was the gendered prescriptions of Jamaican dancehall – in which men perform as kings and women as queens – that contrasted with his use of dancehall as a performative channel through which he could embrace a more effeminate sense of self. He explained how

> 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,

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> with dancehall, I've learnt that as a guy, I cannot do queen's style… [but] I've been doing queen's style all along.

Dancehall provides a performative channel through which he can manifest an alternative expression of his gender, but in doing so, subverts the heteronormative prescriptions of Jamaican dancehall. It was not just Zul that had to negotiate this paradox, but other males who use dancehall as a way to explore their (homo)sexuality as well. As Claire recalled, "when we first started doing [dancehall], all the gay boys loved it… And we loved it, we loved the vibes they brought… In class, you want to go do like a queen, go ahead", whilst Rafi – a Malay male in his early-20s who identifies as a closet bisexual – shared how "when I perform [dancehall]… my costume is more of the feminine side; I use make-up… I dress up as a girl". For Rafi, the performative freedoms of dancehall go beyond movement, and involve more overt expressions of gender transgression as well. What unites the experiences of Ren, Cheryl, Zul and Rafi, are the negotiations they have to work through when reconciling the embodied freedoms of dancehall in Singapore with the rigidly gendered expectations of Jamaican dancehall *culture*. Whilst Cooper (2004: 126) theorises the female in dancehall as 'an act of self-conscious female assertion of control over the representation of her person', these assertions must navigate the parallel frameworks that distinguish the acceptable and unacceptable performance of gender and sexuality embedded within Singaporean and Jamaican dancehall. Singaporean dancehall affords more fluid and/or transgressive expressions of gender and sexuality; it provides a channel through which embodied freedoms can be pursued within the context of ethno-religious prescription and socio-cultural conservatism. These provisions cause the gendered and sexual normativities embedded within Jamaican dancehall culture to be ignored, overlooked, and sometimes rejected. Through the rejection of dancehall's enculturated prescriptions, Singaporean dancehall thus provides a uniquely cosmopolitan expression of the embodied self.

4.3 Spaces of cosmopolitan affectiveness

Whilst dancehall engages the body and is performed through the body, it also has the capacity to affect other bodies. Cooper (2004: 3) defines dancehall culture as "promiscuous" in that it represents the 'original, asexual Latinate sense of the word – "mixed together"', yet the affective impulses that emerge from, contribute to, and become so intimately entwined with such mixing play a central role in realising its cosmopolitan appeal. In this vein, whilst

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the body can help to realise a more affect*ed* version of the self, so too can it help to create a space of affect*iveness* through which *other* bodies have the capacity to also be affected. Dax, a Chinese service worker in his mid-30s, explained how learning to be open to his body through dancehall subsequently enabled him to be more open to others as well: "I'm not that open before dance, I don't really speak to anyone. But after I joined this dance[hall] thing, I became very open". From this observation, we can begin to see how dancehall can trigger a form of cosmopolitan affectiveness. Dancehall has been described as unifying in its "boundarylessness", with Stanley-Niaah (2004a: 118) arguing that, during dancehall events, 'boundaries are permeable' and the 'celebration of community is the ultimate aim'. This transmission of affectiveness from the body, to the self, to other bodies, reveals the cosmopolitan underpinnings of dancehall communities. Stanley-Niaah (2004a: 128) describes this process when recalling an interview with a Jamaican dancehall artist, who 'feels the dance everywhere in her body radiating like renewing energy; when the vibes take over she steps out of her self'. Indeed, when asked what was unique about dancehall, without exception, all my interviewees stated that it was the "good vibes" that defined the community. In this sense, the practice of dancehall can lead to the creation of spaces of cosmopolitan affectiveness.

The practice of dancehall in Singapore is a resolutely cosmopolitan act, but it goes beyond the embrace of cultural diversity (or "promiscuity") that dancehall encapsulates. Rather, it is the embodied nature of dancehall that causes new, more affective forms of cosmopolitanism being to be realised. These forms are often based on the embrace of the unity of embodied affectiveness, and reveal the 'bodily capacities to affect *and* to be affected that emerge and develop in concert' (Anderson, 2016: 9, original emphasis). Elle, whose reaction to her first dancehall class was described above, went on the explain the experience: "class started and I was like 'oh my god!'… there was this spirit, like… energy. Everybody's energy coming together, then I was like, 'that felt nice!'". In this sense, cosmopolitanism can be understood as an embodied feeling; a sense of connection to the self and to others that results in individuals 'quiver[ing] with affective energy' (Thrift, 2004: 57). Such affectiveness stems from the vibrations – or the "good vibes" mentioned above – that emerge from the practice of dancehall. As Henriques (2010: 75) observes:

> Vibrations have a resonating and reciprocal nature, so that every mechanism capable of expressing them can also receive vibrations… This linkage between

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> active and passive, or impression and expression, helps to break down the traditional boundaries said to separate individual subjects from one another.

This idea of boundarylessness – of overcoming differences between the mind and body, between self and other, between males and females – encapsulates the 'ambiance, atmosphere and feelings generated in and by [a dancehall] session' (Henriques, 2008: 226). Given the prescribed nature of Singaporean youths, experiencing spaces of cosmopolitan affectiveness – those built on good vibes – provide a transformative departure from their day-to-day lives. The affective cosmopolitanism of dancehall is that which taps into a shared corporeal frequency that 'pulsat[es] with heartbeat and kinetic dance rhythms' (Henriques, 2010: 57). Affective cosmopolitanism is built upon the unity of heartbeats and are catalysed by the "kinetic dance rhythms" of dancehall music. In itself, this foregrounds a degree of openness to difference, which in turn serves to cast every body as equal to others. As Aisha explained:

> It's open. You do dancehall, you want to share, you want to vibe with someone, you're welcomed… It's like anybody can just share, you can just learn from anybody, really. I think that's something that brings everybody close in the community. And just being okay with anybody in the community… When you see someone dancing and you really want to vibe with them, it's that rawness that brings that vibe together. It's not very caged, it's very open.

This notion of good vibes leading to a sense of openness can be explained by Katz's (1999: 343) observation that 'a kind of metamorphosis occurs in which the self goes into a new container or takes on a temporary flesh for the passage to an altered state of being'. This "altered state" is that of affective cosmopolitanism that emerges from the good vibes of dancehall. It is a sense of connection that stems from a shared, affective, experience, with these connections providing the preconditions from which 'new ways of living may appear, emerge or be produced' (Anderson, 2012: 35). Claire explained this connection as "I know how you feel, when I see someone doing it [dancehall], my body knows how they feel. You know how it feels, like, in your body, there is that connection". Through such connections, bodies become centrally implicated in the 'creati[on of] conceptual space for the recognition of ontological diversity in the space-times of the here and now' (Jazeel, 2011: 78-79). Bodies are spaces of cosmopolitanism affectiveness that can not only lead to the realisation of the self, but through such realisation can lead to a sense of inter-personal connectivity as well.

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Being rooted in the affective potential of the body, these connections are boundary-agnostic, and foreground the inherent cosmopolitanism of dancehall culture.

The affective cosmopolitanism of dancehall is decolonising in that it encourages dancers to realise the self, and to engage with others, in ways that overcome the prescriptions of gendered, ethnic and religious ways of being in the world. It enables a more cosmopolitan form of interpersonal engagement. Openness to the body leads to openness to the self, and, subsequently, to others as well. As Elle put it, the good vibes of dancehall enable her to "build connections between the ones around you and with you". Through these connections, otherness becomes a non-signifier, as everyone is united through dance. Zhang Wei and Khai, two polytechnic students in their late-teens and mid-20s respectively, observed how "it's like you don't have to know each other, but you can still dance together" and that "for dancehall… you're appreciative of other people… it brings everyone together, everyone just respects one another". In more tangible terms, Cheryl explained how good vibes enable her to become more open to dancing with males, and to feeling "very comfortable with each other, even with the guys. It's so 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". Her "amazement" in her embodied openness to dancing with a male within such a short period of time can be seen to reveal the extent to which dancehall has empowered her to forge a new, distinctly Singaporean, sense of cosmopolitan openness, and, in doing so, to overcome the restrictive prescriptions of the socio-cultural context in which she lives.

5 CONCLUSIONS

In January 2019, acclaimed dancehall choreographer, Blacka Di Danka (with Clayton William), released a music video on YouTube. The video was for a song called *Bubble Up*[7], and features, amongst other things, clips of dancers from around the world performing to the song. Amongst dancers from countries like Colombia, Japan, Poland, and the US, the Singapore dancehall community was also included. Indeed, the Singapore dancers (many of whom were interviewed as part of this project) were the most numerous, and the most well-represented in the video. The video brings to life some of the ideas raised in this paper. First

[7] See: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ulxv2dTBZ7w.

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and foremost, it highlights the cosmopolitan nature of dancehall, being rooted in Jamaican traditions of music and movement, but finding relevance and appeal globally. Second, it heralds the embodied nature of such cosmopolitanism, with wining and twerking being common movements that provided coherence and a connection between the dancers. Movement did, in other words, unify them. The lyrics of the song – specifically the directives to *bruk out, bruk out, shake it like a dice*, and even the name of the song, *Bubble Up* – validate these movements, urging listeners and dancers alike to "break out" of the cognitive constraints that may limit the movement of their bodies. Third, and finally, the Singapore dancers were filmed in front of *SCAPE – an organisation and space dedicated to the support of Singaporean youths. The fact that *SCAPE is located in the heart of Orchard Road – Singapore's internationally-known shopping district – brings into symbolic contrast the normative vision of Singapore as a cosmopolitan, global city-state, and the more affective cosmopolitanisms that are reproduced through dancehall.

With these three insights in mind, the video can be seen to highlight the decolonising potential of dancehall, and the power of affective cosmopolitanism as a conceptual framework for understanding new forms of cosmopolitan self-realisation being practised around the world. As Hope (2004: 107) observes, dancehall 'provides its actors with real tools for an attack on and revolution against the confining superstructure of their localized framework'. It provides an attitude towards movement that enables people around the world to engage with the most powerful tool available to us – our bodies – and to use it to forge a new sense of self, and a new way of being in the world. Within the "confining superstructure" of Singapore, this engagement is transformative, as the movements of dancehall provides a performative channel through which young Singaporeans can 'inhabit space and time that is not secondary to consciousness but primary' (Cresswell, 2006: 73). In real terms, dancehall provides avenues for new forms of self-realisation, whilst in more abstract terms it provides a new sense of cosmopolitanism that is rooted in the affective potential of the body. Affective cosmopolitanisms can, therefore, in a world of colonising impulses, be interpreted as forms of protest; as ways of reclaiming the self through the humanising unity of movement. As the video for *Bubble Up* attests, the affective cosmopolitanism of dancehall foregrounds 'potent modes of community' (Stanley-Niaah, 2004b: 115) that cut across pre-existing lines of difference, and find unity through bodily engagement instead.

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Dancehall provides a powerful counterpoint to the self-colonising discourses of cosmopolitanism that are reproduced in Singapore and elsewhere. However, it also validates Delanty's (2006: 42) warning that 'if the cosmopolitan moment arises in the construction and emergence of new identities or forms of self-understanding, cultural frames and cultural models, then mediation is the key to it'. The affective cosmopolitanism of dancehall does not provide a singular route to self-realisation or emancipation, but should be interpreted as one influencing factor amongst others. The moment of affective cosmopolitanism achieved through the practice of dancehall is often fleeting, and needs to be aligned with the socio-cultural structures within which it is experienced. Affective cosmopolitanisms should therefore be seen as 'the expression of new ideas, opening spaces of discourses, identifying possibilities for translation and the construction of the social world' (Delanty, 2006: 42; also Woods, 2020b) if their emancipatory, decolonising, potential is to be fully realised.

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