Jamaica's Difficult Subjects
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Published by The Ohio State University Press

The Ohio State University Press, 2014.
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“WHAT YOU SAY, ELSA?”

POSTCOLONIAL SOVEREIGNTY AND GENDERED SELF-ACTUALIZATION

You a go live. No you nah dead. Nor live ina no suffering eider. Ah swear dat to God—a sell me soul an' body firs.

—The Harder They Come

We need to cultivate a historical intelligence, which is sensitive to the fragility of personality, and the constrained options which exist in given episodes. The carnival masks of the Hero, the Coward, the Villain, the Victim are only briefly worn by individuals whose complex agency deserves our attention. We are incompetent to give it if we confuse the masks, which amount to styles of perception, for the individuals.

—Richard Drayton

Introduction: “Every game I play, I lose”

Perry Henzell and Trevor Rhone’s The Harder They Come (1972) was inspired by the much-publicized exploits of Vincent “Ivanhoe” Martin (“Rhyging”) and was Jamaica’s first feature-length film. The film dramatizes a few of the events from his criminal career, including his execution by police on the morning

of October 9, 1948. The Sunday Gleaner describes the event with excitement and flourish: “THE GREATEST and longest man-hunt in the modern annals of Jamaica ended at 8:00 yesterday morning when bullets from Police rifles and revolvers brought to an end the crime filled career of Ivanhoe Martin for whom they had been searching night and day for the past six weeks” (‘Rhyging’ Killed by Police”). Henzell and Rhone’s script, focusing on the transformation of a “good country boy” into a ruud bwai, is built around the circumstances that lead a “good country boy” into a life of crime, notoriety, and eventual death amidst a barrage of bullets on the white sands of Lime Caye.

Following the film’s local and international success, in 1978 Grove Press approached Michael Thelwell to write a “novelization” of it. Thelwell was a prominent Black Power activist and intellectual during the 1960s, and this approach by Grove Press can be seen as a part of the larger intellectual and institutional shifts stimulated by the civil rights and Black Power movements in the United States. Publishers like Grove Press saw this intellectual moment as a lucrative one and in turn commissioned new books, series, and anthologies about the post–Civil War and Black Power transformations in African American life. The Harder They Come is thus situated amidst shifting paradigms of the postcolonial and post-civil rights eras. The centrality of black identity to these moments also situates the film and the novel in the second wave of Caribbean writing, which imagined black nationalism as a central facet of decolonization processes.

The Harder They Come depicts the exploits of one of Kingston’s urban “sufferahs” in a way that is representative of the plight of the entire black working class and its struggles for survival in an alienating national context. This was

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4. There is some contention surrounding who actually wrote the script for the film, made all the more interesting by the fact that no one has seen an actual completed script from which the finished product of the film is derived. See Loretta Collins’s “The Harder They Come: Rougher Version” for a more detailed discussion of Henzell and Rhone’s creative relationship in the production of this film.
5. In Standard English, ruud bwai translates literally to “rude boy.” I use F. G. Cassidy’s orthography to represent Jamaican English throughout this project for consistency.
6. His death on a white sand beach is an additional commentary on what gains privilege in the Jamaican political and economic landscape. Ivan’s death in this setting symbolizes the tourist-haven vision of Jamaica as the one that prevails over the bad man and the anomic he represents, which is viewed as the threat to the pristine, sunny image of the white sand beach—the source of tourist dollars that bolster the Jamaican economy.
Postcolonial Sovereignty and Self-Actualization

a context that still bore the vestiges of centuries of colonial domination and slavery. Both narratives condense historical events that transpired over the course of thirty years into about four to seven years in the life of the main character, Ivan. This condensation of three pivotal periods in Jamaica’s history (a century beyond emancipation to pre- through postindependence, that is, the 1940s to the 1970s) into a few years from the life of one man reflects that the film and novel are not simply about singular personal struggles. They use a single journey to link events separated by time into one vision or point of knowledge that lends a collective sense not just to Ivan and his struggle, but also to the newly independent Jamaica and its own struggles for sovereignty from slavery to beyond independence. Thus, Ivan can be (and is) read as a representative figure of resistance within the country’s historical struggle for sovereignty. Also depicted in Ivan’s story are many of the historical, religious, social, political, economic, and ideological shifts in the contemplations and formulations of competing ideologies of collective imaginations. Ivan’s negotiation with various -isms (classism, racism, and religious fundamentalism, for example) parallels Jamaica’s own negotiations, as it seeks to define itself as a sovereign nation.

We might trace the problems faced by Ivan and other members of the urban poor back to the immediate nineteenth-century postemancipation context when colonial managers and their backers sought to establish among the former slaves a laboring class shaped by the epistemology, psychology, and culture of enslavement. The denial of reparations for enslavement as well as prohibitive land-ownership policies (artificial inflation of land prices up to sixty times the market rate for Afro-Jamaicans) combined to strategically regulate and effectively curtail Afro-Jamaicans’ access to land ownership and proprietorship. In the postemancipation context, the class of ex-slaves had few options for survival that weren’t tied to laboring or antisocial means. Local and international factors such as labor unrests, agricultural crises, rapid urbanization, and world wars worsened the social, political, and economic plight of the working class in Jamaica, plaguing it with low wages and deplorable living and working conditions. Narratives like The Harder They Come reflect both the disenchantment with the processes of national independence and the ways the cultural landscape became a testing ground for new personas that also sought to resist a growing sense of the power of the state, middle-class entitlement and values, and finally, the institutional exploitation of poor

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working people in Jamaica. The ruud bwai figure at the center of both the film and novel is perhaps the most iconic of these personas.

In 1967, Garth White in “Rudie, Oh Rudie” describes the “rude bwoy” as that person, native, who is totally disenchanted with the ruling system; who generally is descended from the “African” elements in the lower class and who is now armed with ratchets (German made knives) and other cutting instruments and with increasing frequency nowadays . . . In addition rude bwoys are largely centered in those urban areas that suffer from chronic depression and to which migration from rural areas was largely directed in the 50s and 60s. (White 39)

Disenchantment with and ambivalence towards the government and cultural values, along with violent tendencies and dispossession, all characterize this group of mostly black working-class men, ranging between fourteen and twenty-five years of age. Clinton Hutton traces the factors that gave rise to the ruud bwai’s expressions of rudeness and badness, which in turn inspired Jamaican popular musicians to create songs about them. As Hutton suggests, the popularization of this figure through music especially contributed to the mapping of postcolonial resistance, predominantly among lower-class men, in the first decade beyond independence in 1962.9

Bearing this popularization in mind, the star bwai adds an additional dimension to the ruud bwai persona that is relevant here. The ruud bwai’s performance of rudeness or badness by way of civil or criminal disobedience and a particular attitude, way of dressing, and speaking is heavily informed by the characters played by Hollywood film stars in spaghetti westerns and gangster movies. Identification with the characters played by particular film stars (Clint Eastwood, James Raft, and Humphrey Bogart, for example) informed the ruud bwai persona, posture, and desire for a similar sense of celebrity and fame.10 When Ivan moves to the city, his ambition is to become a famous singer, and the ruud bwai posture is pivotal to his transformation into a star bwai. As we see through the news media’s obsession with Rhyging in the 1940s and his immortalization in film and novel, infamy also comes to characterize a star bwai.


In all three versions of Rhyging’s narratives across Jamaica’s historical and cultural landscapes (news media, film, and novel), it goes without saying that the exploits of this iconic male figure are central. As such, the critical discourse surrounding the film and the novel, beginning in the 1970s, centers in large part on the social and political significance of Ivan’s negotiations with various versions of masculinity as mediums for expressing postcolonial sovereignty. This is true even of critiques that address limitations in the ruud bwai persona. Rhonda Frederick’s discussion of the “Panamá man” or “Colón man” foregrounds the ex-Panamá canal worker’s relationship to nationalism and the possibilities he offers for an empowered black masculinity. The Panamá man in Thelwell’s novel is Maas Nattie, who is also one of Ivan’s earliest and most stable (financially and spiritually) models of man-ness and whose version of masculinity seems in some ways superior to the ruud bwai model. As Frederick suggests, “Rhygin’s death at the end of The Harder They Come and Thelwell’s depiction of women as left behind (Mirriam, Ivan’s country girlfriend), sexually available (Delores), or treacherous (Elsa) [also] stands as signs of the limits of this masculine characterization” (Frederick 120). Both the film’s and novel’s portrayals of male protagonists in principally male environments problematize the ability to think about the other modes of gendered subject formation they also present. Thus, Frederick rightly points to the ways The Harder They Come is about negotiating postcolonial masculinity, and how the women present seem stock in their roles as spiritual transmitter (Miss ’Mando), left behind, provocateur, and traitor.

Frederick here identifies the terms in which Elsa and the other women in the narratives have entered critical conversations. Because of the narratives’ essentially masculinist milieu, women in them serve as part of the mise-en-scène, appearing in ways that are conventional when examined against other contemporary work. Frederick compares Miss ’Mando to Ma in George Lamming’s In the Castle of My Skin, for example, and concludes that they “both . . . [act] as transmitters of peasant and spiritual cultures.” In this “guise,” she writes, “’Mando and Ma are startlingly familiar representations of the Caribbean female subject, particularly when read against the innovative characterizations of their respective protagonists” (Frederick 117).

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I would like to suggest, however, that this startling familiarity is complicated when it comes to Elsa. In this chapter, I argue that the means by which she is able to secure health care, education, and a future for her ward Man-I—even in her treacherous portrayal—are comparable to Ivan’s, both as innovative characterizations of Jamaican negotiations of sovereignty in the early postcolonial period. Here I am not interested in recovering Elsa as an unambiguously positive model of female identity. The focus on the ruud bwai—and other such masculine postures—as the predominant vessel of postcolonial resistance and rebellion undoubtedly naturalizes masculinity as the embodiment of postcolonial resistance and rebellion and limits the ability to read other modes of resistance and rebellion that are also present. Nonetheless, feminist critiques of the marginalization of women in national narratives also inadvertently serve to reinforce a devaluation of the versions of womanhood depicted in the predominantly masculine narratives of the first and second waves of writing. The dual goals of empowering the dispossessed and marginalized postcolonial subject through resistant forms of masculinity and of recovering female subjectivity from the margins of the nation work together to obscure the expressions of female self-actualization in narratives like *The Harder They Come.*

While I do not deny the value of discussions of rebellious black masculinities or of feminist critiques of the stereotypical representations of women, I focus on Elsa to highlight what continues to be elided due to the ongoing power of these oppositional strategies, formed at particular historical junctures, and ask how reading differently can expand our understanding of the problems of sovereignty—both personal and national—in the postindependence period. Though this chapter performs a recovery of the film’s and novel’s vision of female self-actualization, this reclamation remains contingent on the relationship between Ivan and Elsa and reads this relationship as pivotal to both Elsa’s choices for self-actualization and autonomy and Ivan’s fate.

The title of this chapter is a question that is posed in the film to Elsa, whose resolute response reflects frustration with the dire economic circumstances that leave her powerless to help her ailing adopted son, Rupert/Man-I. The scene begins with Rupert screaming in pain as Elsa and his father Ras Pedro try to dress him. She asks Pedro when the illicit though sanctioned ganja trade will resume, and he replies when Ivan is captured. When asked, “What you say, Elsa?” She replies: “You know what I say, Pedro; every game I play, I lose.” The scene then cuts to another that focuses on Elsa going to see the preacher, her childhood guardian, suggesting that she is about to try her hand at a new game and that this time, hopefully, she will not lose. In both the film and the novel, it is Elsa who tells the preacher where the fugitive Ivan
is hiding, awaiting a boat to escape to Cuba, and the preacher gives this information to the authorities. As a pivotal agent in the progression of the plot, Elsa’s visions of sovereignty and self-actualization are entwined with her ability to provide economically for the sick child, both in the present and in the future.

I suggest, then, that in the film’s and the novel’s 1970s and 1980s milieus, the varied demands of decolonization and gendered empowerment overshadow the ability to read what does not meet either demand. In particular, this chapter illustrates how Caribbean criticism’s continued reliance on resistance, rebellion, and revolution, geared towards establishing specific kinds of cultural nationalism, inadvertently replicates within postcolonial contexts exclusionary practices reminiscent of colonialism. Patricia Saunders cautions that “we need to consider the ways in which discourses of resistance also work to reinscribe hegemonic practices, particularly where women are concerned.” Moreover, “the cultural, economic, and discursive linking of gender and sexual politics needs to be considered in relation to nationalist politics and nationalist constructions of sexuality” (Saunders, “Is Not Everything” 112). Examining Elsa enables the consideration both of how discourses of resistance in the first wave of writing inscribed a gendered hierarchy and of how gender and sexual politics are themselves linked to nationalist politics.

As my citing of Frederick’s and Saunders’s work suggests, this chapter’s analysis of Elsa relies on strategies of feminist critique facilitated by the third wave that carry on as much as they challenge considerations of nationalist constructions of gender and sexuality. Today, the ruud bwai remains as an iconic and perpetually evolving figure in the Jamaican culture, and as such, through the hindsight of a twenty-first-century vantage point, the cause that Ivan seems to marshal appears more complicated than resisting or being alienated from ruling middle-class nationalistic values. Likewise, Elsa’s actions are also more complicated than the predictable gendered assumptions that enabled the critical dismissal of her. The crisis of the postcolonial present requires a revisitation of critical assumptions concerning these texts, their hero, and the hero’s undoer.

This revisitation might begin by considering the role working-class characters like Elsa and Ivan played in the founding of a politically sovereign Jamaican national identity. The reformist goal of Jamaica’s independent political machinery was the consolidation of the nation around a plural consensus informed in large part by middle-class cultural values and interspersed strategically with select elements of Afro-Jamaican culture.12 As David Scott, among

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12. See Rex Nettleford’s *Caribbean Cultural Identity* and *Mirror Mirror*. 
others, suggests, however, in our contemporary moment this pluralist consensus is in crisis because particular constituencies of lower-class citizens especially have little to no investment in it. A shift has taken place between the 1960s and the present in the relationship between the moral-political spaces occupied by the popular modern and the reforming nationalist middle-class modern who ushered the country into political independence. Today, the former poses a threat to the historical hegemony of the latter, not because it is alienated from it, but because, as Scott suggests, it is indifferent to it (Scott, *Refashioning* 194). In Jamaica, the exclusionary politics of the official national identity replicated colonial hegemonic values and often meant dire economic consequences for some citizens. Participation in various modes of cultural production and informal economic ventures allowed those alienated from official notions of nationalism to insert themselves into markets beyond the stringent control of the state. As such, cultural modalities of self-fashioning and actualization became intricately linked to economic viability.

In *The Harder They Come*, the exploitative though nonetheless potentially lucrative music industry and ganja trade are examples of viable (and sometimes illegal) informal economic ventures. The viability of informal economies (particularly those circulating around popular musical culture) creates autonomy among the once dispossessed and alienated poorer class. Existing alongside values of Christian conservatism, sexual propriety, responsibility, civic decency, and decorum we find the value of the dollar, which can render members of the poorer class no longer alienated from official notions of national citizenship and subjectivity, but instead no longer dependent on and thus indifferent to them.

**Fashioning Self**

**RUUUD BWAI AND BAD GYAL**

How does Elsa’s character help to revise/refine/expand critical approaches within this contemporary moment of crisis for cultural nationalism, though? Because it is central to my own understanding of gendered postcolonial modes of self-fashioning and actualization, permit me to outline at minimal length the portions of David Scott’s discussion of ruud bwai self-fashioning that are relevant to my analysis of what I call bad gyal self-fashioning and actualization.¹³ This includes his sense of what reading Fanon “through” Fou-

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¹³. This phrase is used to refer to a particular kind of empowered female identity in Jamaican parlance and popularized by/within musical culture.
calt can enable in our understanding of postcolonial subaltern self-fashioning and how the concept of “docile bodies” informs such expressions of self-fashioning. Here and admittedly throughout this book, I take as my own and expand upon the following of Scott’s aims in *Refashioning Futures*: to formulate “a form of reflection that historicizes the present conjuncture as a way of creating politico-conceptual space for transgressing its limits” (Scott 1994). Recognizing the critical limits of the present historical conjuncture and creating a conceptual space for transgressing its limits is central to this project. I position bad gyal self-fashioning and actualization as a complementary converse of Scott’s notion of actualization via ruud bwai self-fashioning. To do this, I discuss *The Harder They Come* comparatively with Sistren’s collection of autobiographical testimonies *Lionheart Gal* and Donn Lett’s film *Dancehall Queen*. My discussion of these texts maps the terrain of postcolonial working-class female self-actualization into and beyond the contexts of resistance and rebellion. What I hope to offer in this comparison is a more developed sense of what I refer to here as bad gyal self-fashioning and its relationship to economic viability and sovereign postcolonial subjectivity.

According to David Scott, the ruud bwai is the “paradigmatic Fanonian figure” of the 1960s in his “embodiment of an internalized colonial violence and [as] the practitioner of alienated rituals of resistance that could be read (and was read) into the vision of total anticolonial overcoming” (Scott, *Refashioning* 1995). The independent nation, constituted as it was in part by British colonial values, alienated some, who in turn resisted the cultural values of the newly formed nations. Scott, however, sees the ruud bwai as enacting more than resistance and envisions other politico-conceptual possibilities in the current context for this figure that go beyond “total anticolonial overcoming.” Scott centers on the ruud bwai and this figure’s paradigmatic embodiment of Fanonian anticolonial discourse to do the work of revising postcolonial criticism’s oppositional questions into ones that unsettle the settled settlements of postcolonial sovereignty. This work becomes possible by reading the ruud bwai “out of the alienation/realization paradigm . . . and [folding it] into another” (Scott 1994). Foucauldian discourse is where Scott suggests Fanonian interpretations of the ruud bwai might be folded. He imagines such theoretical maneuvering as “enabl[ing] us to keep alive a productive tension between (simplifying somewhat here) a demand for the closure of politics and a demand for the deferral that makes space for a genealogical ethics” (Scott 1995). Scott’s impulse in reading Foucault with Fanon is to unsettle

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14 While there is some divergence on for whom the indifference of an ascendant working class constitutes a crisis, Deborah Thomas’s theories of modern blackness complements in productive ways Scott’s discussion of the popular modern’s indifference to the national hegemony.
the yearning for collective realization and consensual harmony inherent in processes of decolonization and nation building. For Scott, it is important to “keep alive a productive tension between on the one hand, a politics that aims to find a ground for consensus, and on the other, an ethics that is suspicious of any normative foreclosing of the assertion of difference” (Scott 201). Deferring resolution and consensus buys time for the work of ethicality that resists the impulse to foreclose on difference. Ultimately what is at stake here is the troubling of a brand of liberation purchased by cultural nationalist projects that are contingent on the construction of an essential native subject.

The necessity for Foucault, according to Scott, therefore comes at the place in the Fanonian story that is heavily dependent on a single normalized and central (often) national identity. As critics tend to agree, “the story of the postcolonial state in the Caribbean, [. . .] is normalized as the story of the empowerment of peoples of African descent, as peoples whose ‘authentic suffering’ has guaranteed them a special and permanent dispensation” (Scott 204). Nonetheless, as Scott suggests, this “licenses too unreflective an idea of an essential native subject” (Scott 205). This brand of liberation often presupposes the metaphysical idea of an essential nature that is prior to the imposition of historical oppression, such as slavery and colonization. Historical oppression denies the expression of the “Real Self,” represses it within an oppressed self; liberation therefore occurs when repression is removed and the “Real Self” is freed. Scott sees Foucault as encouraging us to be suspicious of “this whole metaphysics of self and power” that sees the liberation of self as a terminus of power (Scott 206). Foucault, in Scott’s estimation, encourages us to ask whether or not the break with colonization produced by political independence is “adequate to the task of constructing the ethical practices of freedom through which the postcolonial community is fashioned” (Scott 206).

In colonial and postcolonial contexts, the body is a crucial site for practices of liberty. In my own thinking about female self-actualization among the lower classes, I follow what Scott does in “sketching an indication of some of the coordinates through which a reading of one postcolonial practice of freedom on the site of the body might be pursued” (Scott 209). The body at the center of Scott’s discussion is a male body of the ruud bwai, but I place the female body centrally here in order to illustrate other possibilities of the conceptual-political space that Scott inaugurates. There is value in Scott’s calls to resist normative foreclosing of the assertion of difference and “unsett[le] the settled settlement of postcolonial sovereignty itself” in order to be more reflexive about this entire business of sovereign postcolonial subjectivity (Scott 204).
Before moving to Elsa, understanding the ruud bwai’s body’s centrality as a paradigmatic model of alienation/realization in the decades just beyond independence, and the shifting of this centrality in the decades since the 1980s, is pivotal to understanding discourses of postcolonial self-actualization and sovereignty more generally. According to Scott,

The *ruud bwai* is at once a figure of intense fascination and mortal dread, of urban folk-heroization and draconian police operations, at once an emblematic Fanonian figure of internalized violence and rituals of embodied resistance, and the incarnation of a desperate, even pathological, criminality and lawlessness. (Scott 209)

In the late 1960s, the ruud bwai becomes fixed in the new nation’s popular imagination through music and comes to embody the prolonged movement of unrest and protest among urban popular forces, particularly among the poorer classes in West Kingston. Thus, “among the more visible of these social forces threatening the order of the nationalist-modern were the *ruud bwais* who struck up an attitude of defiance toward the authority of the state, its police, and its judicial system” (Scott 209). When the revolutionary imagination of resistance during this period is hinged as it was on this figure, the critical ostracizing of another figure that undermines his resistance and betrays him to the authorities becomes a little more understandable. Scott’s desire to read the rude bwai in ways other than through discourses of alienation/realization nonetheless also opens up a few additional discursive possibilities for Elsa.

**DOCILE BODIES: RUUD BWAI VERSUS BAD GYAL**

What Scott does is “to rework this idea of the relation between the body of the colonized/postcolonized and power” (*Refashioning* 212). He reads “those contracted muscles, that contorted face, and the deliberate movements” of the ruud bwai “not as the repressed internalization of colonial violence but as the positive signs of a certain practice of self-formation” (212). The practice of self-formation as a practice of freedom is what interests me here. As Scott tries to “understand *ruud bwai* self-fashioning . . . as an ethical practice of freedom,” I focus on Elsa to try to understand the gendered limits of self-fashioning as an ethical practice of postcolonial freedom. Scott asks, “How is it possible to practice freedom within the prevailing relationships of power, within the prevailing hierarchies of civility and citizenship?” (214). He asks
these questions to “think ruud bwai self-fashioning as a concrete practice of the self that produces a transgressive interruption of the circulation of normalized consensual identities in urban postcolonial Jamaica—those identities that are taken to define who belongs (as well as how one belongs) to the body politic” (214). Elsa’s attempts at self-fashioning are implicitly detrimental to the impulses of ruud bwai self-fashioning and the degree to which her actions can constitute “a transgressive interruption of the circulation of normalized consensual identities in urban postcolonial Jamaica” remains highly disputable, insofar as her actions tangibly effect the ruud bwai’s exclusion from the official national body politic (214). Nonetheless, I would argue that the centrality of her body to her own self-fashioning compels us to consider the possibilities she does offer for a “a transgressive interruption of the circulation of normalized consensual identities.” What practices of self and freedom does Elsa represent? Is she simply an agent of the status quo?

According to Scott, “ruud bwai self-fashioning constitutes a practice of the self by means of which the (typically) young, working-class male refuses the disciplined body of postcolonial order, refuses to be a ‘docile body’” (214). In a provocative divergence, it is strategically rendering her body as docile that gives Elsa access to a mode of self-fashioing and actualization. This notion of female strategic sexualization is not a new one. It is informed by Carolyn Cooper’s and Donna Hope’s explorations of how women capitalize on their sexual objectification within the milieu of dancehall culture. According to Hope, “for the woman in the dancehall . . . the knowledge of her power and value to the male as a woman becomes a route to her ascendancy. If male heterosexuality is a valuable route to masculine identity, then her role as chief facilitator in this process can be used to ensure her access to resources” (Hope 62). As Cooper suggests further, dancehall’s “affirmation of the pleasures of the body, which is often misunderstood as a devaluation of female sexuality, also can be theorized as an act of self-conscious female assertion of control over the representation of her person” (Cooper, Sound Clash 125–125). Though both Cooper and Hope speak specifically about gender and sexuality within the milieu of dancehall culture, their consideration of the sexualized female body as a material resource is relevant to thinking about Elsa’s self-actualization as a similarly disenfranchised working-class woman.

My departure from Scott thus necessarily occurs around the practice of self that resists being a “‘docile body’ available to be worked over by capital, to be worked over by the police, or to be counted by the statistical ideologues of representative democracy” (Scott Refashioning 214). While we can read Elsa as “set[ting] out to take hold of the body’s energies [her]self and to impose upon it a new regularity, a new order, a new set of rules and values, a
new patterns of pleasures,” to do this reading, we have to be aware of its gen-
dered parameters. Where the male body is concerned, “central to this new
order of the body is precisely the cultivation of an agonism, a decidedly truc-
ulent rhythm, and a menacing surface that tears at the edges of the govern-
ing classed/raced cohesion” (Scott 214). As The Harder They Come illustrates,
agonism, truculence, and menace to cohesion are not necessarily hallmarks
of female self-fashioning. I would ask here, though, does this then preclude
women from the possibilities offered by this approach? Within the Jamaican
cultural landscape, is the ruud bwai the only twentieth-century embodiment
of the disruption of the project of postcolonial nationalist modern? I sug-
gest that he is not, and propose Elsa’s representation of a yet uncharacter-
ized female subjectivity as an additional embodiment of disruption that exists
alongside the ruud bwai.

In the novel, if Ivan is able to conjure up an alternate and empowered real-
ity through cowboy films and star bwai aspirations—which are embodied by
Rhygin—Elsa’s recognition of the two (Ivan and Rhygin) as distinctly different
personas enables her to use this split to her benefit. The sickly boy Rupert or
Man-I provides the motivations for her decisions in the latter half of the nar-
ratives. His parents are a part of the police-sanctioned ganja trade, but when
his mother is killed by the army in a raid that is a politically motivated show
of force against narcotics trafficking, Man-I’s father is left to raise him alone.
Providentially, his mother’s death also means his father Ras Pedro needs a
new trading partner, and this is where Ras Pedro’s and Man-I’s lives converge
with Ivan’s and Elsa’s. Ivan and Ras Pedro trade together, while effortlessly,
Elsa assumes responsibility over Man-I’s care. The deterioration of the boy’s
health coincides with the halt in the protected ganja trade that is sparked
by Ivan’s insubordination, crime spree, and status as fugitive. Because their
income stream has dried up, Elsa and Ras Pedro are unable to afford much-
needed medical care for Man-I, and as such, Elsa is faced with difficult deci-
sions. When Pedro tells her that the traders don’t want to give Ivan up so
that the trade can resume, she concludes “Ivan dead,” . . . “Is Rhygin time
now” (Thelwell, The Harder They Come 382). Her pronouncement of Ivan’s
death acknowledges Ivan’s transformation into a city-worn ruud bwai and
seemingly absolves her of responsibility over the fugitive Rhygin. It is Man-
I’s health and welfare that is central to her actions from here until the end of
the novel. In the wreckage of their home after the police have ransacked it in
search of Ivan, she rocks the frightened and sick child

until he was calm and promised him, “You nah dead Man-I. I swear you
nah go dead so . . . you, you a go live. I don’t care what I have fe do. You a
go live. No you nah dead. Nor live ina no suffering eider. Ah swear dat to
God—*a sell me soul an' body firs.*” (383–384; my emphasis)

Where the male body’s movements have come to engender the resistance to
docility and, by extension for Scott, an expression of self-fashioning, Elsa’s
resolve here reflects how women recognize and are able to exploit postcolonial
orders’ dependence on disciplined and docile bodies.

In the last two decades, there has been an upsurge in critical attention
given to the commodification of sexuality within the Caribbean public sphere,
particularly as it relates to the ways global industries like tourism capitalize on
the eroticization and oversexualization of Caribbean bodies, and Caribbean
female bodies in particular. Kamala Kempadoo’s edited collection *Sun, Sex,
and Gold: Tourism and Sex Work in the Caribbean* (1999) and *Sexing the Carib-
bean: Gender, Race, and Sexual Labor* (2004) are among the first extended
analyses of the complex intersections of international capitalism, sexuality,
work, and identity in the Caribbean from slavery into the twentieth century.
Faith Smith’s more recent edited collection, *Sex and the Citizen: Interrogating
the Caribbean* (2011), also draws on the region’s history of sexual exploitation
from colonization to the present. Smith’s collection is a multiauthored and
interdisciplinary approach to sexuality in the Caribbean, which is situated in
yet challenging of the assumptions of feminism, literary and cultural studies,
and queer studies. As Sandra C. Duvivier points out, however, while these
interventions into the discourses of international capitalist exploitation of
the Caribbean region and its bodies are significant, “more critical attention
could also be given to ‘private’ representations of the sex industries in these
locales, as many sex workers’ activities occur outside of the public sphere with
Caribbean counterparts as their main clientele” (Duvivier 1104). Elsa’s deci-
sion making in *The Harder They Come* provides an opportunity for thinking
about these private representations within a more specific and localized con-
text. For the life and well-being of the child, Elsa is prepared to do what she
considers a last resort of sorts—selling her soul and even possibly her body.

The final barrier between her and this decision comes down when the
driver refuses to let her ride in the ambulance with the sick boy, saying, “Sorry
sister, rules is rules. Tek a taxi nuh” (384). Though she “had open her mouth
to scream” she closes it instead and does the following:

She smiled and walked over to the driver. “Den honey . . . .” She grinned,
fondling his sleeve and trying not to smell his rummy breath. “Den is what
time you get off duty. Nobody have to know, y’know—an later . . . .” She
stroked his arm and rode to the hospital with the boy. (384)
As if the memory of previous barely veiled sexual solicitations were still fresh, Elsa commands the resources she literally has at hand to secure a ride in the ambulance with Man-I by hinting at a future sexual liaison with the driver once he is off duty.

“Me tek Radcliff just fi eat food”: Elsa through Sistren

Elsa’s actions here can be understood within the larger context of the experiences of working-class women in the two decades immediately following political independence. Her experiences find company with the experiences of real women in the Sistren Collective, for example, whose testimonies are documented in Lionheart Gal. I will address in more detail this theater collective, its work, and its literary project Lionheart Gal in the next chapter, but a few words briefly for the immediate context. Lionheart Gal relates testimonies of Jamaican women, including litanies of rape pregnancy and sexual activity without the most basic of sex education during the formative years of sexual and reproductive development. It also portrays warning parents, grandparents, and guardians, who more often than not turn young women out of their homes, humiliated, once their growing bellies betray pregnancy. In repeated instances throughout the collection, unprotected sexual activity and consequent pregnancy features most prominently among the occasions when young women “first become aware of the fact that [they] were oppressed as [women]” (Sistren 15). It also positions the immediate demands of mothering—material care and welfare for children—as a central priority for women. The decisions they make are determined in large part by the needs of their children. Pregnancy often occasions the end of formal schooling, and the additional financial burden that comes as a result of pregnancy—a new mouth to feed and body to clothe—positions the female body, in Lionheart Gal, as an element in her oppression.

Conversely, however, the narratives also assert that prior to finding legitimate gainful employment, more often than not, women exchanged sexual favors for their and their children’s livelihood. The narrator of “Ole Massa and Me,” for example, confesses entering into a relationship for financial support for herself and her children:

A better me couldn’t do mek me go de wid Radcliff . . . Me tek Radcliff just fi get lickle help fi Allan and Rachel. After him go way, Dennis never even come look pon him pickney come see if dem dead or alive. So me tek Rad-
cliff just fi eat food. Me never love him nor notten, but me did a just try fi cope till me come back pon me foot. (Sistren 228–229)

She is uneducated and unemployed, with no means of supporting her children outside of their father’s financial support. She runs away from home as a young girl because of a violently abusive brother and begins a relationship with another man, Radcliff, “fi get food” (Sistren 228). “Better” in this case is the ability to financially support herself and her children after their father, Dennis, abandons them. As with Elsa, her children’s reliance on her for food and shelter form the basis of her actions. These comments appear as a defensive disclaimer for “tekking” Radcliff. The necessity for providing for her children justifies this sexual relationship.

Empowerment and agency are paradoxically enmeshed in these narratives of oppression by women who “haffi do sometings whe [dem] no really waa fi do, just fi survive,” using their bodies to procure the resources necessary for their and their children’s survival (Sistren 221). Where Scott sees indifference in ruud bwai self-fashioning, I see complex ways women negotiate the terrain of the popular modern in order to guarantee material benefits for their children, which are often expressed in terms of middle-class values and aspirations for ascendancy and mobility.

If we are tempted to dismiss Elsa’s actions on behalf of her adoptive child as clichéd and stereotypical, we are able to resist this temptation by connecting her to the lineage of body-based, maternal, and reproductive resistance that Lucille Mathurin Mair outlines in her study, “Recollections of a Journey into a Rebel Past.” Mathurin Mair notes that in her quest to examine women of all races and classes in the region’s slave past, “the black slave woman emerged as the most aggressive of women: she took center stage as rebel” and confounded “customary perceptions of the passive sex, whose physical mobility is constrained by motherhood” (Mathurin Mair 55). Accordingly, she describes female slaves as industrial saboteurs both in terms of physical labor and reproductive power:

They aborted regularly . . . When they did give birth, slave women exercised their maternal prerogatives to the maximum: few female acts provoked more frustration and rage in estate managers than women’s insistence on nursing their infants for as long as they could and too often for the estate’s liking, often for as long as two years. It was an effective strategy because slave laws provided nursing mothers with time off and special allowances, all charged to the estate’s accounts. (Mathurin Mair 56)
Though Man-I is not her biological child, Elsa's awareness of her body as a resource is part of this history of maternal resourcefulness. She thus echoes a history of female slave rebellion that occurs within the only terms a slave woman has available to her, her body.

The “eternal Ni” that Lionheart Gal’s editor Honor Ford-Smith suggests lurks “behind the familiar image of the domesticated nanny” is also pivotal to our discussion of Elsa in the postindependence context (Sistren 2).” In Lionheart Gal, the testimonies of women outline how their bodies become both the center of their suffering and the means by which they can exercise power and agency. This claiming of power and agency through the body echoes elements of Ni’s legend that situates her locus of resistance within her physical body. According to the Ni legend, “they say . . . [s]he bounced bullets off her bottom or she caught them and threw them back” (Sistren 3). Using her body as a weapon against assault in order to procure survival for herself and the maroons she led resonates with the way Elsa decides to use her body on Man-I’s and her own behalf.

Ultimately, understanding female sexual exploitation within a context of resourcefulness, rebellion, agency, and resistance requires an alteration of preconceived terms of resistance and agency. As Ford-Smith suggests, to even recognize the Ni characteristics present in women’s lives and, by extension, their testimonies of marginalization and sexual victimization, one may need to reconsider power and agency:

> It may be necessary to readjust one’s sense of the rules of resistance and the limits of power . . . It may mean coming to terms with the ways in which ordinary women have determined their own struggles for themselves and the ways in which they have assessed their own victories and defeats. (Sistren 2–3)

The women portrayed in the collection recognize the potential of their bodies as a tradable commodity that can procure the resources necessary for survival in the absence of other employment and resource-procurement possibilities. Envisioning what can be seen as prostitution as empowerment and agency requires a readjustment of our concept of power, but that readjustment is necessary to understand these women’s struggles with their own sovereignty, survival, and self-actualization. These narratives, like Elsa’s, portray women who assess their circumstances and decide on particular avenues of action.

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15. Ni refers to Jamaica’s only female national hero, Nanny of the Maroons, who was an eighteenth-century maroon leader at the forefront of that group’s pre-emancipation resistance to enslavement.
Orphaned and entrusted to the preacher’s guardianship, Elsa exists in a predatory space with very few options for protection or escape. Nowhere is this more obvious than when Longah tells Ivan the following in reference to Elsa:

“Is long time Preacha tend dah little cherry tree, y’know. An’ when fruit ripe is Preacha to pick it. An’ if him doan pick it I figure say I will pick it mesell—an’ it look like it soon ripe too,” he finished with a suggestive chuckle. (225)

Preacha’s own struggle with erotic feelings for his ward are narrated earlier in the same chapter, but what is interesting here is Longah’s metaphorical suggestion that it is known and accepted that the preacher has groomed Elsa to be a sexual partner once she is of age. If this does not seem sufficiently predatory, Longah’s warning to Ivan that he is next in line for Elsa’s body gives a sense of the sexualized way in which she is viewed. Elsa seemingly has neither choice nor agency in who takes her virginity, but her actions at the end of the novel show her recognition of the value of her sexuality. This recognition offers problematic yet empowering possibilities for her own command of her sexuality.16

Once Elsa leaves the preacher’s guardianship, she encounters sexual predation at every turn; when she goes to see about a room, her exchange with the leering landlord is as follows:

“Is you one a go stay ya?” he had asked, running his eyes over her bosom, when she had first inquired about the room.

“Me bother coming from country soon.”

“Aho, you breddah? Ah see.” He named a figure just about double what she had expected.

“But, dat soin’ high, sah?”

“Well, me dear, it might could go down y’know,” he said, his eyes gleaming with a moist good will. “Is up to you.” (277)

Under Preacha’s strict guardianship, Elsa is protected to some degree physically and economically from predatory men outside his home. Here Elsa first

16. Sandra Duvivier cites the Haitian sociologist Carole Charles, who invokes the Kreyòl phrase “Kom se kawo tèm” (my body is my piece of land) to describe the ways poor Haitian women with extremely limited economic resources define their body as a form of capital that can reap profits if strategically invested. In pointing this out, I’d like to make clear that viewing the body as capital or marketable commodity isn’t unique to these texts or Jamaican culture, but occurs across the region.
becomes exposed to the economic value of her sexuality, but at this stage she responds only with discomfort rather than opportunism.

Until Ivan becomes a ganja trader, Elsa’s life is a scuffling one of walking day after day through middle-class neighborhoods looking for work. We get a sense of the futility and humiliation inherent in this activity from Ivan’s own early attempts to find work. Within his first few months in town, Ivan is quickly and harshly apprised of the reality of his situation as a new, non-skilled, nonpartisan addition to the “sufferahs” of Kingston. He is scornfully denied legitimate employment that he finds himself begging for, only to be rewarded with scathing words of humiliation that lump him into a sea of other dispossessed youth just like him. In one early encounter, he resorts to begging only after the lady of the house refuses him the work of tending her garden or washing her car, and even rejects the desperate “ah can do anyt’ing, anyt’ing, mam” (172). Her response is indicative of how the ruling class viewed the group of dispossessed young men of which Ivan has unwittingly become a part: “I don’t believe in young healthy boys begging—that’s what ruining this country. Beg, Beg, Beg. You should be ashamed—go try to make something of yourself. And lock the gate behind you, too. Go on.” (172) Her words, laced with class prejudice, deny the reality of few and mostly exploitative employment opportunities, discrimination, and consequent violence endured by the urban working class that is portrayed in the narratives.

This middle-class black wife in the novel espouses an additional dimension of the prejudice that sees the sufferahs as the cause of the country’s decline and as a threat to the nation more generally. She ironically does not see her own complicity in the country’s failure by denying Ivan legitimate work and then blaming him for not finding work—indeed, chastising him for not being too ashamed to beg. Neither does she see the nonsense inherent in admonishing him to go make something of himself while simultaneously refusing him an opportunity to do just this. This interaction illustrates for the reader the scapegoating, hardship, and prejudice meted out to those like Ivan, who are denied work but criticized severely for resorting to begging and consequently blamed for the nation’s problems. Petty criminals—like the hand-cart boy who robs Ivan within minutes of his arrival in Kingston; Jose, who inducts Ivan into the ganja trade; and eventually Ivan himself—are examples of those who resist this humiliating and debilitating cycle altogether, choosing instead to eke out their living on their own terms through predation and other illegal means.

Elsa’s resolute practicality, which is focused on nothing other than legitimate means of survival, initially, nonetheless, contrasts Ivan’s approach. What she is prepared to do daily in order to secure work so they can buy food is no longer an option for Ivan. He says, “You want me fe go beg rich people yard-
bwai work fe ten dollars a week fi di res’ a my life? Well understan’ dis—Ah dead firs’” (292). To his further outrage, she calls him a “dreamah” when he tells her he is going to make it to be more than a “yard-bwai.” Ivan exhibits here that he has higher ambitions for himself than begging or menial work. Elsa seems at this stage incapable of dreaming about anything beyond finding work and buying food. Ivan’s involvement in the ganja trade, though, offers her the possibility to imagine contentment beyond survival, within established and inequitable means.

With a steady income from the ganja trade, Elsa is able to rent with Ivan, Ras Pedro, Man-I a “little house,” which “she presided over with such satisfaction” (303). Outside of Preacha Ramsey’s house, Elsa becomes obviously more mature, not because of the implied sexuality of living as a common-law wife, but rather through presiding over her own domain, and especially taking care of Man-I. Though she expresses her reservations about living with Rastafarians, which are in keeping with the prejudices of the time, she is immediately taken with the child, because the child takes to her: “Look how the solemn-faced little bwai Prince Man-I tek to her—it touch her heartstring dem, the way ’im perk up an’ seem to recover strength since she started looking after him” (302). Elsa’s fulfillment and self-actualization seems to spring from a maternal instinct: “Little Man-I needed her . . . She felt something in herself open up before that need, blossom and flourish . . . Now she had for the first time in her life what she could call a family and rich contentment in a life she could never have imagined” (302).

While Ivan dreams of being a star bwai, Elsa finds contentment in their unconventional family. This contentment is juxtaposed with the bad memory of the “cramped tenement room . . . the hot eyes and moist looks of the fat landlord, the rummy voices of the girl next door an’ her visitors; the hot futile pilgrimages looking for a day’s work, door to door.” In her new situation she concludes “all that was behind her” (302). Of course, it is problematic that her sense of self-actualization is bound up in domesticity rather than any actual concern for her own self-fulfillment, but it seems shortsighted to be dismissive of the decisions Elsa makes to secure the lifestyle of contentment that she finds, even if it is through illegal means, and even if her desires do not seamlessly fit into established categories of resistance, rebellion, and empowerment.

Upon closer reading, it is unsurprising that Elsa betrays Ivan. The stability and security of a domestic milieu motivates her actions in both texts. In order to protect the contentment and stability of her home and family, she does everything she possibly can to nurse Ivan back to himself both after he receives corporal punishment and after Hilton buys his record from him for
a meager amount with no promise of royalties. As Ivan says, she “is a lion gal” (290). Elsa demonstrates practicality in decision making throughout the novel, particularly as it relates to protecting what she comes to see as her family.

“She can cork any session”: Elsa through *Dancehall Queen*

Nonetheless, if Ivan at the end of the narratives self-actualizes as a star bwai through his achievement of infamy and notoriety even in death, where does this leave Elsa? What possibilities are offered within critical practices for her self-fashioning and actualization? In the film, after Ivan's body falls dead on the beach, the credits roll up against the dancing torso of a woman's body, offering an interesting commentary on who will be left standing at the end of such struggles with authority. Much like the end of *The Harder They Come*, at the end of *Dancehall Queen*, the power available to the male working-class citizen and the female working-class citizen is oppositionally juxtaposed. It is not in the least unproblematic that both texts seems to pit lower-class men and woman against each other in a fierce battle of survival over very scarce benefits. But the desire for a less exploitative, more cooperative communal reality should not hinder our ability to read and articulate the terms of self-fashioning and actualization that these narratives outline. I position this image of the dancing female body as a bridge from the narratives of *The Harder They Come* to the more contemporary narrative of dancehall culture as it is represented in the film *Dancehall Queen*.

The evolution of dancehall occurs in the historical and political context of the 1980s, and it provides an additional space where women are able to garner (sometimes very lucrative) economic benefits by using their sexuality as currency. Originating among the predominantly black youth of Kingston’s ghettos, dancehall is at once a musical form of recreation and a dynamic commercial space of cultural production that generates capital locally and internationally. Described as reggae’s rebellious younger sibling, the music and culture surrounding it celebrates explicit sexuality, violence, profanity, and consumerism in ways that often conflict with Jamaican society’s more conservative values.” Donn Lett’s 1997 film *Dancehall Queen* depicts various
sites within dancehall culture that include both performance and production components.

At the center of the film is a depiction of a working-class single mother of two daughters struggling to provide for herself and her family—a narrative we are already familiar with. The local don, Larry, supports Marcia and her two daughters in exchange for sexual access to the older daughter, Tanya, once he believes she is of age. Fifteen-year-old Tanya rejects his sexual advances, and Larry responds by refusing to provide any additional support, leaving Marcia and her children in the lurch. Marcia’s income from selling small items (sodas, candy, cigarettes, and beers) from a handcart is insufficient to cover the expenses of Tanya’s private schooling, much less the other family expenses. After seeing the reigning dancehall queen Olivine in her everyday clothing and driving a BMW, Marcia begins to entertain the notion of entering the dancehall space, also as a dancer. She invents an anonymous alter ego persona, the Mystery Lady, by enlisting the help of two other women in her community, a generous neighbor and a dressmaker. These cooperative efforts among women on Marcia’s behalf echo the collective possibilities for empowerment that we see in the work of Sistren.

Through her Mystery Lady performances, Marcia is able to trade her daughter’s sexual objectification for her own by packaging herself as a commodity for consumption within the dancehall economy. Donna Hope’s work offers a useful overview of the avenues of production and consumption within dancehall culture through her discussion of the different typologies of “affectors” and “affectees” (Hope 33). The “affectors” are the creators of dancehall culture and include individuals who write the lyrics to be performed by the singers and DJs; operators of the sound systems who provide the music for dancehall events; the economic backers who produce and promote dancehall music, events, and artists for local, regional, and international markets; models and dancers who create the hype within the dancehall through dance, slang, fashion, and styles that will be imitated by dancehall consumers; photographers and videographers who create and disseminate still and moving visual images of dancehall culture within and beyond the boundaries of the actual dancehall; and the DJs who are engaged in the oral performance of dancehall music. The “affectees” are those who consume the dancehall commodities produced by the “affectors.” Within the context of these categories, Marcia’s entrance into the dancehall economy as a dancer is also as a “dynamic hype creator” in the affector category. As a dancehall dancer, she “engages in

Politics of Identity in Jamaica (Mona: University of the West Indies Press, 2006).

18. For a more detailed breakdown of the typologies existing within each of these categories, see Hope 32–35.
dynamic creation/re-creation and display of dancehall dance styles that are inevitably imitated by dancehall consumers” (Hope 29). Female dancers usually engage in erotic and sexual displays as part of their dance styles. In the privacy of her bedroom, Marcia imitates the style of dress and movement of the other dancers before she makes her debut in the African Star dance-hall. The movements are sexually explicit, and the elaborate yet revealing costumes function to erotically display her body at dancehall events.

Marcia's decision to commodify her body within the milieu of the dance-hall's culture and economy is juxtaposed with the way her daughter Tanya's body is commodified by Larry and her mother for the family's survival. Instead of continuing to facilitate her daughter's unwilling sexual exploitation, Marcia packages herself for the dancehall to earn the money it will take to sustain her family without Larry's help. Marcia's actions are in keeping with the reinvention “of the terms of struggle and the strategy itself” as Ford-Smith asserts (Sistren 3). As Donna Hope argues, within the dancehall, “women are . . . placed in a position where they can and do reap significant economic benefits by using sexuality” (Hope 46). As the Mystery Lady, Marcia performs a sexualized role that also places her in an entrepreneurial position of commodifying her own body for economic advancement. In Hope's words, “the knowledge of her power and value to the male as woman becomes a route to her ascendancy” (Hope 62). Marcia recognizes the value and potential that her body offers for material ascendancy. Recognizing Olivia's ordinariness as similar to her own, she sees no reason why she can't also perform as a dancer, and in turn becomes able to manipulate a system of female sexual objectification for her own benefit.

Narratives like *The Harder They Come*, *Dancehall Queen*, and *Lionheart Gal* complicate notions of female disempowerment postulated by traditional feminist criticism. Such complications suggest that our critical lenses need to be adjusted to accommodate not only modes of unconventional resistance but also the ways these modes of resistance come to constitute a means of actualizing a nontraditional, more empowered and autonomous sense of self that is able to exist within a community in ways the ruud bwai, for example, is not, or perhaps more accurately refuses to do. In her seminal essay “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” Laura Mulvey does the very important and groundbreaking work of critiquing the male gaze and its effects on female agency:

> The split between spectacle and narrative supports the man’s role as the active one in advancing the story, making things happen. The man controls the film fantasy and also emerges as the representative of power in a further sense: as bearer of the look of the spectator. (Mulvey 1449)
While Mulvey’s argument may seem to leave no room for the empowerment of the spectator’s subject, characters like Marcia and Elsa give critics pause to rethink the power dynamics inherent in masculine heterosexual fantasy, particularly within postcolonial and developing spaces. The latter’s choice of dress in the novel and the former’s Mystery Lady performances capitalize on a male sense of control of the fantasy. Both their seductive performances occur with an awareness that within these inequitably structured communities, it is the men who have the financial means and resources that they need. In Dancehall Queen, Marcia uses her sexual objectification to manipulate Larry and Priest, who both receive titillating visual pleasure from her performances as the Mystery Lady, in the dancehall and privately.

Likewise, Elsa, in the novel The Harder They Come, resolved in her decision to do whatever it takes to ensure Man-I’s health and well-being and emboldened by the enjoyment she experiences in overt flirtation, writes the document that seals Ivan’s fate. She “dressed herself carefully in the red satin blouse and miniskirt about which she and Ivan argued. She had never worn them before. The buttons had been ripped from the tight blouse so she knotted the ends and went into the street” (387). Dressed in the skirt she refused to wear for Ivan for reasons of modesty, she proceeds to the preacher’s house, and their exchange is imbued with Elsa’s sense of confident assurance in the cleric’s desire for her body and the ways she can manipulate this desire. She says: “I’ve brought what you always wanted.” Though he seems to resist with “You’re not welcome here, dressed like that,” she counters confidently, “‘Cho Preacha, admit say you like it, nuh’ she teased, and spun provocatively” (387). We do not get a full account of what she tells the preacher to copy and sign, but what we do get refers only to the elements Elsa wishes to use her sexuality to exchange: “received this information from . . . for the care . . . an’ education of said Man-I” (388). It is worthwhile to point out here that the film and the novel have very different representations of Elsa’s attire when she makes this visit to Preacha. The novel presents a more sexually objectified Elsa, dressed in red, and the film presents a penitent-looking Elsa, dressed in white, with her hair covered. Though the appeal of both outfits might be different, the motivation behind them is the same. Whether penitence or seduction, her selected attire is meant to placate her spectator so that he can more easily be manipulated for her benefit.

Both women make “things happen” through female spectacle, designed for male sexual gratification, in the interest of advancing their narratives, their own upward social mobility, and the financial ability to take care of their children. While the pleasures of the body articulated here are located within the context of the dancehall, I would suggest that affirming notions of
the pleasures of the body are transportable into other areas of women’s lives. Dancehall can be understood as an “erogenous zone,” as Carolyn Cooper suggests, a “liberatory space in which working class women and their more timid middle-class sisters play out eroticized roles that may not ordinarily be available to them in the rigid social conventions of the everyday” (Cooper, *Sound Clash* 103). Despite the propensity to understand sexual capitalization solely as a devaluation of female sexuality, closer attention to women like Elsa and Marcia allows us a more complex idea of female sexual performance as a mode of self-fashioning and actualization in ways that also potentially transcend class. Both films illustrate complicated active/masculine and passive/feminine binaries, adding an additional layer of reluctance to thinking about Elsa as an active agent in the orchestration of her own future at the expense of Ivan’s. While their manipulation by men is undeniable, relegating either of these women to passive objects of pleasure is not a necessary conclusion.

Marcia’s awareness of the male control of the fantasy allows her through performance to manipulate her position as object of that fantasy to secure upward economic mobility for herself and her daughters. Spliced into the sequence of her dance performance for the dancehall queen competition are scenes of the fight between Priest and Larry, which ends fatally for Priest. Her performance gets more frenetic, her gyrations more provocative as the violence between the two men escalates. The two-scene sequence is united by the same song “What’s the Move.” At the end of the song, Marcia wins the contest and $100,000 in prize money, Priest the murderer is dead, Larry is humiliated that he was tricked by a woman he had previously rejected in favor of her teenage daughter, and more importantly, the community is overjoyed that one of their own, “a normal street vendor,” has risen to the ranks of dancehall stardom. She leaves the African Star lawn in her everyday clothes as Marcia, amidst a throng of adoring fans, pushing her cart down the street.

Her return to Marcia suggests that she consciously separates the two—the Mystery Lady is an alter ego who is performed by Marcia, who is the real person. The performance of the fantasy ensures the livelihood of the reality. The confidence and empowerment she gains in performance mode, however, is undeniable; on and off stage, her performing body secures the financial means of not only supporting her family but also avenging her murdered friend, the loss of her brother’s sanity, and the rape of her daughter. The film ends with Marcia smiling directly into the camera, a woman more self-assured and confident from her victories, as well as $100,000 richer.19

19. Before my discussion of a filmic depiction of the dancehall becomes construed as a wholesale pronouncement that the film and the culture of the dancehall it depicts are unproblematized sites of empowerment and agency for women, it is important to point out that
The Harder They Come offers us a glimpse of something similar for Elsa. In the final pages of the novel, Elsa uses Ivan’s notoriety to rebuff the advances of the ambulance driver, who she ultimately does not sleep with, in an exchange that she enjoys: “she smiled at him flirtatiously, genuinely beginning to enjoy herself” (385). We can surmise that what Elsa enjoys here is not only the flirtation but the ability to control and manipulate the resources she has at hand. The seductive self is one she ultimately embodies to manipulate oppressive circumstances for her own benefit. The inability to separate two personas, as Elsa and Marcia can, is perhaps the ruud bwai’s fatal flaw. Authenticity has its limits.

“Dese is you fuchah”

Ivan is lured from the safe confines of his mountain home by his aspirations to become a famous singer, which is ultimately a desire to live a life worthy of note. Naming his acts of criminality as “history to raas” suggests an understanding of the monumentality ascribed to recorded events and a consciousness about these events within his community (349). What he does affects the lives of others, and he expresses pride and excitement in participating in an event named, recognized, and lived as “history.” In the novel, Ivan manages to achieve historical notoriety, worthy of his own folk song, just like the policeman from his favorite ballad as a child, but he achieves this through

female performance within the dancehall does not neutralize or negate male domination. For example, leading up to the big show that would feature the dancehall queen competition between the Mystery Lady and the reigning queen, Olivine, is a musical montage of the various precompetition preparations, all of which involved some level of profit generation. Flyers are printed and posted en masse throughout the city to advertise the dance, vendors stock up to prepare for the event’s crowd, and Marcia prepares herself by participating in a publicity photo shoot and fits costumes for the competition. The depiction of the dancehall economy at work presents the problems inherent in an uncritical and wholesale pronouncement of dancehall culture as empowering for women. This culture is far too complexly textured for any hasty either/or pronouncement. Instead, what is ascertainable is that the dancehall space is one that generates money, and as such, it allows women to capitalize on their own exploitability through particular kinds of performance. The purse for the contest is $100,000, but what does the actual dance pull in at the gate and in bar proceeds? The overall wherewithal and power here lies with Beenie Man, who declares the contest and announces it to frenzy dancehall fans. As the promoter, he stands to benefit far more from the proceeds of the dance than the winner will benefit from the actual prize money. The women, who are the main attraction, have no claim on this larger source of money. In the film, then, Marcia’s (and Olivine’s) bodies become the literal background of a financial machinery that circulates more capital around the dancehall than the grand prize and dancehall queen trophy.

20. Thelwell, The Harder They Come 326.
criminality. Throughout the narrative, this sense of personhood remains legitimately unattainable to him as a lower-class “sufferah,” and he finds personhood, notoriety, and fame only through crime. Ironically, though he dies, he has achieved all the goals he set for himself. His infamy leads to the popularity of his reggae song, while his time as a fugitive has the country in fear yet enthralled for months leading up to his death. At the end of the novel, the ruud bwai’s endurance in the popular imagination is conveyed through the game played by the two boys after his death. Child’s play evokes and resurrects Rhygin, who continues to be versioned beyond the grave. Thus, while ruud bwai self-representation is by no means dead in our contemporary cultural landscape, the ruud bwai’s fatal indifference to established order can be juxtaposed with the bad gyal’s manipulation of order from within the confines of an oppressive system.

In the novel, many of the poor city dwellers share a similar reality of migration and dispossession; this shared experience is given some prominence in the novel through the delineation of its own narrative perspective in sections headed by the title “Tribal Vershann.” These sections convey the urban community’s collective consciousness. The first time in the novel that this narrative perspective appears is when Ivan returns from his trip back to his mountaintop home to find that he literally had nothing left there. Ras Pedro’s instincts when he says “Ah feel me breddah get a blow” are correct in their characterization of the impact of Ivan’s loss of his idealized conceptualization of his mountain origins (324). For Ivan, “far, far back in his mind, lying dormant and unused but nevertheless very present and comforting, had been the notion that the mountains and river would always be there, unchanged and waiting” (325). When he returns, he realizes that everything about the mountains and rivers was changed; furthermore, nothing from Blue Bay to his mountaintop was waiting for him. He acknowledges not having any plans to go back except showing off his success, but he also acknowledges a desire to “feel the presence of his generations. To renew himself with the splendors of his childhood. He saw it as a place that he could retreat to, when “broken like Mad Izaac he could creep back and lose himself in the warm untroubled waters of his beginnings and await the end.” His certainty that his childhood home would always be waiting for him whenever he needed to return “walked with him, an invisible anchor, a silent comfort” (325).

When he does return, though, Blue Bay’s fisherman’s beach is now the site of the Sunset Cove Condominiums, prohibitively guarded by a “Private Property” sign, no longer freely accessible to the fishermen, but only to “members,” who are predominantly tourists (314). Perhaps even worse, when he tries to find his family’s land, he “missed the turnoff on his way in; it seemed no more
than a stony track steep and rutted, running up the gut of the mountain” (320). He searches the landscape “in vain” for his “people’s graves.” Unable to recognize any of the vestiges of his youth or the lives of his ancestors who lived on this land for generations, Ivan laments, “Whe’ de kitchen? The pig sty? De coffee patch? The goat pen? Lawd Jesas, a whe’ me deh?” (320). His shock and grief stems from the absence of any indication of his family’s presence in this landscape: “All signs of human presence, industry, organization, order, were gone without visible trace . . . There was no evidence of the passage of generations, the ancestors whose intelligence, industry and skill had created a self sufficient homestead here. None—at all” (320). With resignation he concludes, “Nutten no de ya now, me can’ even get down deh.” This inability to even access his relatives’ graves is tantamount to losing his ancestors; he cries repeatedly, “LAWD JESUS, ME PEOPLE” (321). The novel’s omniscient narrative voice tells us that finally Ivan “realized just how important this sense of place was to his most fundamental sense of himself” (321). The certainty of access to this place and its ancestral grounding is the essence of Ivan’s sense of self and dignity up until this point in the novel—a connection he makes, unfortunately, when it is too late.

Ivan is not alone in this need for a rural anchor, but as the novel suggests, this anchor is more an object of his imagination than it is material. Indeed, modernity creates the imagined country past as its point of origin, just as nationalism creates the folk. As the novel tells us, “the same certainty [in a rural past] was a part of the psyche of all the city’s dispossessed” (325). The imagined reality of “back a me bush” becomes a source of dignity among the denigrated and dispossessed:

One heard it often . . .

“Bwai, me no have fe take dis shit, y’know—me can jus’ go back a me bush.”

“Not because you see me so, y’know—me come from somewhere, y’know.”

“No bother t’ink say me have fe stay yah, y’know—fe me people land de a country await.” (325)

Ivan’s mother, Miss Daisy, expresses similar sentiments after a particularly grueling and humiliating day as a domestic worker. “Me ‘bush’” offers those subject to the city’s oppressive inequalities a sense of land ownership that gives dignity and hope through an ever-present possibility of escape (135). It also imbues a sense of origin, lineage, and ownership that counterbalances the squalor of their urban lives. Nonetheless, the novel’s depiction of the rapid modernization of Ivan’s “bush,” through the tourist and bauxite industries,
undermines the remembered rural past’s capacity to counteract the displacement and disenfranchisement of urban working poor. Ivan’s loss of his folk origins marks his descent into violent criminality and presages the full emergence of Rhygin. The novel describes this break first as a psychic one, where Ivan becomes suspicious of the concreteness of his idealized memories of his childhood. He wonders if “he too was the victim of false history, memories of realities that had seemed so solid and permanent but were really ephemeral things, shared by no one” (326). Despite the ironic fact that the “tribe” of the city’s dispossessed shares this sense of anchoring, what seems to demarcate Ivan is what happens to him when he loses his certainty in it. Thus his transformation to Rhygin is characterized by the following: “All that was real was what he had now. The past had deserted him and the future . . . raas, what name so?” (326).

Ivan is unable to imagine a future without his tangible sense of his history, yet a moment of ironic foreshadowing occurs when a fellow ganja trader named Midnight Cowboy casts the guns—destructive instruments of violence—as his future. Ivan’s loss of his ancestral grounding is also a loss of himself and a surrender of sorts to Rhygin. The guns he purchases from Midnight Cowboy directly after he returns from the mountains replace his ancestral grounding. As Midnight Cowboy says, “Dese is you fuchah” (326). After spending some time “acquainting himself” with the guns in a cane field, Ivan “was exhausted but felt as though something had been replaced. Not restored, for what was gone could not be restored, but there was something in its place” (326). As the narrative continues, “is deesso it begin” (326). As we see through Ivan, ruud bwai subjectivity embodies a sense of loss, replacement, and a clear split between differing modes of self-fashioning, which is not the case in portrayals of bad gyal subjectivity under consideration.

The tensions inherent among various avenues of self-fashioning and actualization in this cultural milieu provoke for the ruud bwai a psychic split, which is also characterized by a break with reality. The film version of The Harder They Come visualizes this split with flashbacks to films and the experience of watching films; the novel presents Ivan’s muddled stream of consciousness through the memory of films and the film-going experience. Thus, when the security forces storm the beach where he is hiding, he says, “So what dem a wait for—is Sands of Iwo Jima dis to raas? Is mus’ Iwo Jima dem t‘ink dem deh” (389). Ivan reads the scene as he has read others, through the ethos of a particular film—this time through a 1949 depiction of a World War II battle. 21 This invocation of the theme of neo-imperialism as represented through

21. Ivan’s first act of violent criminality also occurs under distorted vision, where the lines between reality and film are blurred. Amidst the altercation with Longah,
the various military campaigns of World War II imbues the scene of Ivan’s execution with similar resonances of freedom and self-determination.

For Ivan, the context for these global concerns comes from what he sees on the big screen. It is through these imaginative tropes that Ivan can imagine an empowered sense of self in his postcolonial Jamaican environment, and it is unsurprising that the lines between his actual reality and film realities become blurred in this final showdown. His question, “Were they real—or another scene from a movie,” reflects a sense of confusion. According to the hero model, if this is a film and he is its hero, he can’t die, at least not until the end of the movie. For Ivan, “show doan over a raas! Star-bwai can’ dead after all . . .” In the film’s script and in history, it is the invading forces that prevail, however, and for Ivan, this last scene is on the last reel. In a misreading that proves fatal, Ivan erroneously envisions his own victory through a two-gun showdown: “Sen out you fastes’ gun—de bes’ man uno have. Sen’ him out” (390). Ivan’s execution doesn’t occur in a two-gun showdown, but the security forces gun him down en masse. The sands of Lime Caye are not the sands of Iwo Jima, nor are they a town in the wild American west. Unlike his female counterpart, at the end of this narrative the ruud bwai seems tragically unable to effect a successful convergence between an oppressive postcolonial reality and an actualized self.

**Conclusion: What Elsa Says**

Both *The Harder They Come* and *Dancehall Queen* juxtapose the bad gyal’s manipulation of order with the ruud bwai’s fatal indifference to established order. Though the ruud bwai is cast as a villain in the latter film and a hero

suddenly a strange thing happened. His head cleared and he was there but not there. In one way he seemed detached and floating above it all, seeing himself on the ground with a burly figure crouched above him. He saw himself rolling quickly out of Longah’s reach, jumping to his feet and whipping out his *okapi*. He saw Longah stop, look alarmed and break off a bottle. It was like watching the scene in *From Here to Eternity* where Lancaster and Borgnine are in the bar. He heard himself say, “If it’s a killing you want Fatso, it’s a killing you get.” (256–257)

Ivan goes through an out-of-body experience that separates him from reality and transports him into an alternate filmic reality in which he is the star bwai, so his victory in this battle is guaranteed. Omniscient narration conveys a scene in which the reader can see Ivan cognitively transforming his reality. His disconnect from actual reality is illustrated by his repetition of lines from the film *From Here to Eternity* in the midst of the fight. Ivan, though victorious over Longah in this battle, is subject to a humiliating round of bare-bottomed corporal punishment that makes him urinate like a child on the impact of the tamarind switch.
in the former, both are violent criminals, fatally slain at the end of the films. Priest’s death suggests the community will no longer be terrorized by the violence that he carries out at the behest of the humiliated area leader Larry. Marcia’s Mystery Lady performance also restores peace and autonomy to the community. Thus, the celebration that accompanies her exit from the dancehall after she wins the competition is imbued with a sense of her role in returning the community to a peaceful and unterrorized existence. Elsa, however, experiences no parallel congratulation for the implied resumption of the ganja trade—a lifeline of sorts of the impoverished West Kingston community. Through to the end of the film and novel, the community rallied to protect their hero, Rhygin, and even though Elsa’s actions, like Marcia’s, effect a similar restoration of order in a significantly flawed system, there is obvious resistance to seeing Elsa in triumph.

I should pause briefly to point out that in both cases, the order that is restored remains unproblematised. In neither case is institutional change depicted as a significant part of the solution to extreme poverty, dispossession, sexual exploitation, and disenfranchisement within urban working-class communities. Theorizing about the processes that could effect more significant and meaningful institutional change is beyond the scope of this project, but my point nonetheless is that in the presence of minimal institutional change, citizens invent creative and plural means of self-actualization, which we need to be critically savvy in addressing. In looking at these texts together, three things stand out. First is the progression of a particular sense of self-fashioning and actualization among working-class women, second is the near-lack of institutional and infrastructural change contributing to this progression, and third is the question of how critics can begin to speak to the inventiveness of these modes of self-actualization in the absence of institutional change.

Ivan’s inability to imagine a future without his ancestral grounding offers an opportunity to think about this sense of evolution. At first glance, one might be tempted to say that there is no future for the violent and disruptive ruud bwai in the Jamaican cultural landscape. His iconic presence as an influential and powerful fixture in cultural reality nonetheless forces a revision of this conclusion: there is no future for the ruud bwai within the existing version of official middle-class Jamaican nationalism, and as such, his investment is in formulating an alternate reality within the space of the contemporary popular modern. That Ivan cannot imagine a possible future in the city beyond the loss of his ancestral anchoring is indicative of the lack of legitimate modes of self-fashioning and actualization among youths like Ivan. The novel offers Rastafari and Christianity as other possible options,
but it portrays the adherents of the former as enduring sufferers with delusions of grandeur and the adherents of the latter as repressed and oppressively legalistic. In absence, then, there is invention, and ruud bwai self-fashioning ultimately is an exercise in inventing alternate avenues of self-actualization beyond the confines of rigid and inaccessible legitimized avenues.

If we can draw genealogical linkages between Ivan and the late twentieth-century ruud bwai as David Scott does, we can draw similar linkages between Elsa, the women of Sistren, and Marcia. What these linkages tell us about is the future possibilities of both ruud bwai and bad gyal self-fashioning and their varying proximity to and relationship with a ruling though waning cultural nationalism. The female subject appears in some ways more invested in gaining access to the established status quo, even if the means are not legitimate ones. *The Harder They Come* offers us the opportunity to parse the gendered nuances of alienation and indifference. Elsa’s lack of familial lineage is also not insignificant when we consider how heavy the loss of his own lineage is to Ivan. In the end, Elsa’s ability to flexibly negotiate her self-actualization through motherhood, in a manner that unselfishly incorporates the interests of others, starkly contrasts with Ivan’s sense of all-or-nothing anomie. Nonetheless, like ruud bwai self-actualization, bad gyal self-actualization is also indicative of a multiplicity of relational identities present within the Jamaican popular modern, which enables the unsettling of the nationalist modern vision of the postcolonial state and its reliance on a singular conception of citizen-subject.

David Scott’s discussion of the ascendance of the popular modern and ruud bwai self-actualization, along with Deborah Thomas’s discussion of modern blackness, both make significant inroads in framing how critics can begin to view the ranges of inventiveness to be found within the popular modern. Thomas’s modern blackness, for example,

is a part of and itself embodies the cultural plurality that frames the range of ideological and political possibilities for contemporary Jamaicans, [and] it is less a stable and coherent ideological framework for action than a way of seeing, organizing, and imagining that can negotiate and incorporate other ways of seeing, organizing, and imagining (Thomas 261).

Though Thomas and Scott, among others, provide vigorous rereadings of class and sovereignty, with an eye towards a more plural politics, however, these rereadings more often than not end up celebrating the working class as the sole proprietors of subaltern difference.\(^\text{22}\) In its analysis of Jean Rhys’s

\(^{22}\) I am grateful to one of my anonymous readers, who helped me develop my discussion
Wide Sargasso Sea and of the testimonies of the middle-class sistren in Lionheart Gal, the next chapter explores the limitations of the default criticism of the middle class that middle-class Caribbean commentators have tended to engage in, where the middle-class wrings its hands for not being working class and gets to speak for the working class as well.  

23 A noteworthy exception to this default criticism of the middle class is Belinda Edmondson’s Caribbean Middlebrow. This study of middle-class cultural production that spans the nineteenth and twentieth centuries also informs my discussion of class and sovereignty.