# Discordant Beats of Pleasure Amidst Everyday Violence: The Cultural Work of Party Music in Trinidad

JOCELYNE GUILBAULT

*Abstract: In spaces of violence, scholars and activists have typically addressed music as sites of resistance. In postcolonial Caribbean, the focus of most studies unsurprisingly has thus been placed on the work music has done for the oppressed or conversely on the ways the (neo)colonial regimes have used music to increase their control over the masses. Until recently, few publications have addressed the music that has been performed to fortify and gather people together in times of hardship. In this case, what is at stake is not so much a matter of "us and dem" or of resistance, but rather the ways in which the "us" is mobilized to strengthen senses of belonging and networks of solidarity. Amidst the escalating everyday violence since the mid-1990s, party music in Trinidad continues to thrive. Instead of dismissing such music as merely a source of escapism or hedonism, I want to examine what makes it so compelling and what it does for people. This paper is based on in-depth study of soca music making and numerous ethnographic interviews with Trinidadian soca artists and fans over the past fifteen years.*

Over the past decade, violence in the Caribbean has increased dramatically. A 2009 report focusing on Trinidad and Tobago (twin islands, with a population of 1.3 million people) indicates that "whereas in 1998 the country saw 98 murders in absolute terms, by 2008 that number had climbed to 550" (Townsend 2009:21). Drug trafficking, political patronage, armed violence and the resulting "pistolization" of civil society have been linked to the disturbing growth of injuries and violent death. While the number of kidnappings dropped from 155 in 2007 to 6 in 2009 (Trinidad and Tobago Network, 2010 Crime Stats), the number of missing people ranging in age between 4 and 42 has dramatically increased. This anomaly is suspected to be the result of an international human trafficking ring. In 2009 alone, 77 out of the 600 people reported missing were officially unaccounted for, and this number does not

include the many cases still pending (Richards 2010). On another front, even though the state government of Trinidad and Tobago passed a Domestic Violence Act in 1991, crimes of domestic violence continue unabated, due to the challenges of implementing the law (Lazarus-Black 2003).

While the public media focus has been on criminal acts that are more visible, relatively little has been said about hidden violence. This includes systemic violence inherent in the perpetuation of racism, homophobia, and exclusions of all sorts—whether based on ethnicity, gender, class, age, and so on. And yet the debilitating effects of this "invisible" violence, including chronic depression, unending feelings of anger, inadequacy, and insecurity, often lead to alcoholism, drugs, and suicide, and continue to plague the postcolonial country. Therefore, in this article, I will use the term "violence" to refer to psychic as well as physical violence.

It may seem rather incongruous to speak of party music—a term used interchangeably with "soca" music in Trinidad—in relation to this context of everyday violence. However, if we agree that music is influenced by and simultaneously helps shape the conditions from which it emerges, then party music cannot be viewed as being "outside" of what is going on in the country. The question is, what relationship and significance does party music have to the rampant violence in Trinidad I just described? Does the practice of soca music oppose violence, amplify it, or work to create an alternate space to it? In what ways does it provide in itself the right conditions for acts of violence to occur?

As with most popular music genres, soca has taken up different musical forms, adopted different musical instrumentations and arrangements, and featured different kinds of lyrics, since its emergence in the early 1970s. After having been performed nearly exclusively by male artists, it now includes a great number of female artists. And today, instead of being sung by a single artist, a soca song often features two or even three artists at once. In these and other ways soca has distinguished itself at different times in its history. The goal of this paper is to examine the relationship and significance that party music may have had with the rampant violence in Trinidad over the past decade, and therefore I have focused my discussion on the soca that has characterized this period.

When audience members, media commentators, journalists, and soca artists are interviewed about soca from the late 1990s on, they tend to highlight its focus on light lyrics, sexualized bodies, joy and pleasure. The soca which they refer to is performed in two different styles: "power soca" and "groovy soca." Power soca, as its name suggests, encompasses up-tempo songs that invite the crowd to jump up, wave their rags[1] and exult in performing fast body movements together. The song lyrics rarely involve linear narratives and

typically center on one emotion. To maximize audience participation, they throw out a series of dance instructions ("jump up," "wave yuh rag," "raise yuh hands"). By contrast, groovy soca songs are usually about love and adopt a slower tempo. The focus of groovy soca tends to be on sexualized bodies and "wining"—a ubiquitous dance movement found not only in popular music but also in musical traditions throughout the Caribbean. Wining is characterized by the gyrating of the waist. With these two soca styles in mind, Junior Telfer, a veteran and critical observer of the Trinidadian music scene, eloquently summarizes the majority of views about soca that echo what I heard from interviewees I met over the past fifteen years. In differentiating soca from calypso, Telfer remarks:

> Soca is rooted in the joy and pleasure of our culture, so soca music is much more danceable, much lighter in terms of the effects that it has on you, a lot more humor… [In contrast to] the calypsonian who saw himself as defending the poor, the soca artist took it a step further. It's not just a question of defending, but of bringing joy, more joy into the lives of the ordinary folk…The focus is basically on really sharing joy among people, and creating relationships…. And the whole thing about Trini, we're people who like to enjoy ourselves… And to use our music as a way of helping to bind us in enjoying ourselves together is very important in terms of the culture of our country… I love soca because, like so many of us, not just Trini, but human beings, we embrace joy. Joy is a key to our lives. I mean a life without pleasure and joy is horrible to even contemplate. (Personal communication)

However, for many Trinidadians—whether it relates to a particular understanding of morality, a distinct sense of respectability and propriety, aesthetic values, or an interest exclusively in lyrical content—party music in political terms is often dismissed as being escapist, hedonistic, and commercial. Out of these three "evils," commercialism, it could be suggested, has been viewed culturally and socially as the most potentially damaging. The assumption is that commercial music gains its power by using sentiments of joy and pleasure exclusively for economic profit. Furthermore, "based on the long-standing tension between passion and reason in Western thought" (Yanagisako 2002:8) and the belief that passion leads to irrational action, the focus of music such as soca, which is designed to elicit joy and pleasure, has been viewed not only with distrust, but also as having little or no potential for political action or social transformation.

In both interpretations, party music is understood as doing cultural work, however, from two significantly different perspectives: in one case soca's cultural work is viewed solely in positive terms—helping to create relationships and bind people together through the sharing of joy and pleasure—and in the other case, as being exploitative, as Adorno would put it, by focusing on joy and pleasure in terms of its "soporific" effect on social consciousness to manipulate soca consumers into a mindless state of consumption (Negus 1997:10-12).

I want to depart from these two opposing views by suggesting that as with most people and practices, soca music makers and audience members are not always consistent. They do not always act according to the same reasoning and desires. They do not always adopt the same kind of attitude or behavior in soca performances. If we agree with this premise, then party music should not be conceived as performing only one type of cultural work. Put another way, the tangible effects of party music cannot be determined ipso facto to be either positive or negative.

Coming from this perspective, I want to suggest that party music has an ambivalent relationship to violence.[2] In the following text, I want to show how soca music both challenges and reinforces violence, how it deploys a politics of opposition to violence yet at the same time generates (or helps to generate) aggressive and even violent forms of behavior. But before I do so, I want to situate soca performance and practice.

## On Situating Soca Performance and Practice

Party music employs specific musical resources and emerges from and helps shape the distinct sensibilities of different times and different places. Even in the same country, festive music cannot be assumed at all times and for all the various ethnic groups to be enacted according to the same aesthetic and ethical values. So let me briefly situate the soca music to which I am referring.

Party music is a musical offshoot of calypso. Since its emergence in the 1970s it has been conceived and recorded in relation to and performed primarily during the carnival season. Whereas at first it was limited to the official Christian calendar, the carnival season preceding Lent, it is now performed at different times throughout the year both in the Caribbean and overseas, so as not to compete with the audiences they are each trying to attract.

In addition to being a crucial element of Carnival, soca music is also performed in shows, at private and public parties, and in nightclubs. Each

performance space enables a distinct presentation and consumption of soca. I chose to focus on the live performance of soca at shows, fetes, and competitions during carnival for several reasons. This is the time when the party songs are usually first introduced, performed and consumed at their highest intensity. It is the time when the practices and soundings of soca are most audible and visible in all media and are reaching out to the greatest number of people. As cultural studies scholar Natasha Barnes argues, "live performance, as recent theorization in performance studies reminds us, has transformative capabilities that can exist independent of capitalist reproduction and co-option when experienced in live encounters" (2000:98). I also chose to focus on live performances of soca during carnival because having attended numerous shows and seeing the same artists perform during the season I can attest to the fact that live performances greatly intensify people's experiences of soca—the affect and effect it has on you—which simultaneously helps you to remember them. I also chose to focus on soca songs from 1993 until now also because this period corresponds to the times I have been an audience member in many carnivals, soca competitions, public and private parties in Trinidad and in several cities in Canada.

In popular music studies and in Caribbean studies in particular, themes such as violence have been typically addressed through the examination of "chansons à texte," or music such as calypso, with "heavy lyrics" or socio-political commentaries. This is not only because these song lyrics are precisely (and mainly) about expressing a politics of opposition, but also because they form part of a long tradition in the humanities whereby the word has been conceived as the main terrain where politics is waged. While I will attempt to show that cultural politics can be deployed in many other ways, I will begin to explore the relationship of soca to violence by first examining song lyrics in party music that either explicitly oppose violence or use a language connected to acts of violence. In soca there are many songs that do precisely that. To give only a few examples: in 2002, leading soca artist Machel Montano refers to the widespread corruption, and the simultaneous noticeable growth of violence and fear that is poisoning the country.

**Machel Montano, "We Will Carry On" (2002)**

[intro]

As a nation we must not despair
Strenghten your tribes with love not fear, yeah yeah
Join together as one, sing ah joyful song

We will carry on (x6)
We will carry on and on, and on and on and on

[verse 1]

If yuh fed up of corruption (hands in de air)
All the noise and de rukshun (hands in de air)
Lemme see your emotion (hands in de air)
In ah musical explosion (hands in de air)
When festival come (deh cyah hold we down)
In de middle of ah storm (deh cyah hold we down)
If de city burn down (deh cyah hold we down)
Say we will carry on, and on and on and on and on and on

In 2004, with featured artist Fresh Life, Montano continues to address the rampant violence in Trinidad with a song entitled "No War," that implores everyone to stop fighting, using weapons, and "mashing up" the human race. He calls on everyone to stay away from this warfare, to have faith, and to focus on love instead.

**Machel Montano, "No War" (2004)**

Tell me what dey fightin for, Hey
Put up all yuh hand now
Show me all yuh hand now
Let me see de hand dem who doh want no war war war
...

Say me love to see every race
Each and everyone with a smiling face
Why de hell dey mashing up de human race
Putting all dey weapons let's size up de place yo
Get yuhself together and hold up de faith..yo
Let's appreciate love start appreciate
So if yuh heart clean and yuh thinking straight
And yuh know yuh want to run down thru ZION gate..hey

In 2006, together with Benjai, Montano records still another song called "Amnesty," using a song title that refers to the ongoing warfare in the country. In that same year (2006), Bunji Garlin, the winner of several

soca competitions, releases a song about a series of bombings that occurred in Trinidad in 2005.[3] He accuses Trinidadians of being copycats to what he refers to as "the time bombs of Afghanistan" instead of fighting violence in order to avoid complete disaster in the country.

**Bunji Garlin, "Bomb Song" (2006)**

Man start to run, bombs on de ground
Big explosion take place in town
Everybody 'fraid ah de big time bomb
Four, three, two, one
. . .

Afghanistan with time-bomb we want to copy dat
Dat is to show dat down here we full up ah copy-cat
But look to de air, what's up there
Tell dem come wrestle we from here
We want to escape de nuclear
Signal dey dis year

Also in 2006, Maximus Dan, another highly respected soca artist, addresses the dramatic increase in the number of murders with a song entitled "Love Generation," in which he explains how "the loss of life does not benefit anyone" and that "whatever the pain, love can amend."

**Maximus Dan, "Love Generation" (2006)**

[chorus]

Leave home your gun
And bring out your love and come (ay ay)
Doh drink dem rum
Just bring out your love and come (ay ay)
Daughter and son
Just bring out your love and come (ay ay)
Join de love generation
. . . .

[verse 2]

Lead your life with joy and happiness
No segregation but togetherness
Move away from all the prejudice
Then you would see what we can accomplish
From the hope many will benefit
From loss of life, nobody can profit
Your life, my life, you know we got to cherish
Whatever grieve us with pain, love could amend it

Among the few women artists in soca who sing explicitly against violence, Nadia Batson, in her composition "One Island," refers to how Trinidadians are tired of warfare and fighting. Like other male soca artists, she invites men and women to take a stand and fight violence by filling the space with love.

**Nadia Batson, "One Island" (2007)**

Ah come with ah message from above
Ah comin' to fill de place with love
Tout moun -aaa! [everybody]
Danse' - Danse' yow, ah, ah! [dance, dance]
From one Island - To another Island
From one Island - To another Island
From one Island - To another Island
From one Island - To another Island
...

We comin' through de town, dis is de turn aroun'
We only spreadin' love,
We fed up ah de war, we not fightin' no more
Tonight is only love.
...

Every woman an' man, hey! it's time to take ah stand - hey!
Get up, an' show some love...

In 2008, Shurwayne Winchester, a prominent artist from Tobago, performs a song called "No More," not only to depict the ongoing violence in the country, but also to call on everyone to stop it.

**Shurwayne Winchester, "No More" (2008)**

Don't fear
Listen to your conscience
Let's start to change with the person in the mirror

We cannot take the gunshots no more, no more
We cannot take the raping no more, no more
We cannot take kidnapping no more, no more
People balling and demanding

Oh God, I see signs of disaster
Children molested, [throwing up] all over
Some get tortured, then get murdered
Lord, send your fire

Paradoxically, some soca performers such as Bunji Garlin and KMC often use an aggressive style of vocal delivery, shooting lyrics like bullets, to encourage people to stop the on-going violence in the country. In the same vein, some soca artists may use the trope of warfare and its attendant vocabulary. Song titles by Bunji Garlin such as "Warrior Cry," "Preaching War," and "Mash Up" clearly employ this strategy to mobilize attention, to call on the defeat of violence by turning its language against itself, and to call for peace.

While several soca artists have songs in their repertoire which voice their opposition to violence and encourage people to stop it, these same artists perform songs that send some contradictory messages and could be seen to encourage violence. For example, in contrast to his many songs about how much we need more love and unity, the 1999 soca song "Toro, Toro" by Machel Montano, which had a massive appeal and commercial success, seems to encourage audience members to launch into an offensive. The lyrics go like this: "if yuh have the mad bull fever, yuh have it, EVERYBODY CHARGE!… "We come to jump and get on bad just like de bulls…Let de bull dem run tonight!…Hold it straight…Now open d Gate."

I remember vividly on the night of its performance at the soca monarch competition in Trinidad how the whole crowd went wild. Many groups of people bumped hard against anyone blocking their way so they could perform their strong bodily movements, trampled on other dancers' feet instead of waiting for them to pick up the pace and ran and jumped up among the ecstatic crowd. In the local newspapers, some journalists interpreted the words "Charge, Toro, Toro" as inviting people to release their "dark side," to unleash

their negative energies in order to free themselves from its power. The aggressive, at times even violent movements of audience members were viewed not as lashing out against someone, but rather as expelling negative energies from within themselves. The few casualties that occurred during the performance—whether badly injured feet or broken fences around the performance area— were viewed as unintended consequences, not as desired or desirable

Figure 1: Michael Montano, Port of Spain, March 2012. "Singing and dancing to free up or to mash de place?" (Photo by the author)

forms of action. Other journalists, however, took this song as an example of how mindless and aggressive soca songs can be by encouraging an audience to go wild. Regardless of the interpretations, however, the fact remains that this song's performance was built on the violent expressions and behaviors which soca songs usually decry.

In spite of the complex relationship that soca can have with violence—as illustrated by the case of "Toro, Toro"—what most audience members and soca artists highlight when they are interviewed about soca is its focus on joy and pleasure, and the ways in which it creates a space to cultivate a sense of belonging and togetherness. Most repeatedly emphasize how soca songs and performances focus on the positive values of unity, collaboration, and caring for others. One of the strategies in soca to bring about a sense of joy and pleasure among audience members is to engage them in a dialogue. Superblue, among the chief leading figures of soca in the 1980s and 1990s, understood that well. His 1993 overnight classic, "Bacchanal Time," involved the audience in no less than 67 call-and-response exchanges. To create a mood of public intimacy and a sense of immediacy, many soca artists also employ a distinct mode of address: the use of the pronoun "you" in songs like "I Dare You" (Destra) and "Dance with You" (Machel Montano), and the reference to "we" in lines like "we don't want no sympathy cuz nobody can't fete like we" ("Higher than High" by Machel Montano) appear to address every individual directly and yet at the same time make everyone feel part of a community.

Like Junior Telfer, whom I quoted earlier, most of the sixty students aged 12 to 19 whom I interviewed in various schools in Trinidad stressed soca's focus on joy and pleasure.[4]

> Jonathan: (16 years old): Soca? It's about sharing joy, jumping up with each other, having a good time right here right now, let's all unite, let's have fun with each other…
>
> Denisha (15 years old): Yes, it's about *now*.
>
> Jonathan: Everyone, like in a party, everyone jump up together, you bounce this person, the person watch and smile and hug everybody […] they hugging you up… It's just the togetherness.

While soca is widely recognized for nurturing a sense of togetherness that crosses ethnic divisions or rivalries among artists from other Caribbean countries, its impact over time is rarely acknowledged. The collaborations that have permeated the practice of soca artists, or, as Beverley Diamond (2007)

would put it, the alliances they have created and nurtured, have been so numerous over the past ten years that the majority of people I interviewed—soca artists, musicians, fans, organizers—take them now as "normal," even though historically in Trinidad these alliances were actually quite rare. Collaborations on stage and on recordings have nurtured a variety of contacts:

> For example, between younger soca artists and veterans of calypso (Shurwayne Winchester and Calypso Rose), between male and female artists (Machel Montano and Destra Garcia), between two artists of different ethnicities (Rikki Jai and Black Stalin), between artists from different islands (Machel Montano from Trinidad and Alison Hinds from Barbados), between artists from different musical genres (Machel Montano associated with soca and Shaggy with dancehall), and between artists living on the island and in the diaspora (Bunji Garlin in Trinidad and David Rudder, a Trinidadian living in Toronto; Machel Montano in Trinidad and Wyclef Jean, a Haitian living in New York). (Guilbault 2010:283)

Along with the joy it provides to audience members by simultaneously bringing on stage favorite artists and favorite musical genres, these new collaborations can be described as transformative in at least three ways: by creating new bonds among artists, by nurturing the feeling of being part of a much bigger place than just the nation-state of Trinidad and Tobago, and also by encouraging audience members to value what feminist M. Jacqui Alexander (2005) would refer to as interconnectedness, interdependence, and intersubjectivity.

Although soca is widely recognized for cultivating a sense of togetherness, it has nonetheless excluded certain interconnections. To paraphrase the title of one of Alexander's critical articles, "Not Just (Any) Body Can Be a Citizen)," not just (any) body can be a soca artist nor can (any) body in the audience be "free" to have fun with one another. Soca artists reinforce heteronormative relations, and so far have excluded homosexual expression. In other words, not all pleasures are permissible on the soca stage or among audience members. Wining—the local term referring to the gyrating of the waist—is still performed alone, among women, or usually between a man and a woman. As is the case with all Caribbean popular music practices, there is an unspoken rule in soca that men cannot wine against each other. The fear of verbal and physical violence instilled by going against this unwritten rule is such that gay men's expressions of love or affection

have been rendered impossible in public places. Along the same lines, vocal expressions of homosexual sentiments, whether by men or women, have been completely silenced in soca performances. There is a legitimate fear of being ostracized or physically attacked.

Within this space of highly controlled vocal and physical expressions, soca artists lead the crowd and invite them to experience joy and pleasure through their bodies by throwing a series of commands: "Jump up and wine," "Rock yuh waist," "Blow yuh whistle," "Go down low." To infuse a sense of energy, power soca songs are played at a fast tempo, generally between 145 and 165 beats per minute. In so doing, as Maximus Dan explained, "soca appeals to the body. It keeps you dancing, its pulse drives you" (personal communication).

For Mrs. Hunt, a high school teacher I interviewed in Trinidad, soca is a cultural force that brings about certain changes and can release the positive in you. As she describes it, soca is therapeutic: "It is relieving some of that stress and that helps us…and the other positive aspect is that it reduces that tendency for people to get angry, it reduces a tendency for violence and so on…so you just free up, let go, you know?"

From this perspective, soca does cultural work, by engaging a body praxis, a form of embodiment which for medical anthropologist Nancy Scheper-Hughes, "concerns the ways people come to inhabit their bodies so that these become in every sense of the term 'habituated'"(quoted in Alexander 2005:297). For Mrs. Hunt, soca provides the space to learn and habituate people to free up, to let go, and in so doing—it is presumed—to live more peacefully.

Soca artist Shurwayne Winchester echoes the same view that soca affects people's frame of mind. As he explained to me, "The chances of you looking to fight, or getting any violence in a soca fete, you know,… half that time goes because you're so exhausted [jumping up], and you're so filled with some happy memory of you wining, you throwing back a waist, and some of the time you don't even know the person. Soca gives you that avenue to release that energy. And what soca does, it also brings people together" (personal communication). The perception that soca affects people in this way, that it leaves them with happy memories, brings people together, and helps reduce stress and violence, was expressed repeatedly by the majority of those I interviewed. Even though the claim that soca helps reduce violence would be hard to prove, the belief that it does allows soca to be viewed as a cultural force that cannot be easily dismissed.

The emphasis of soca songs on creating an intense rhythmic drive and building up energy can, at times, create unintended effects. Instead of help-

ing to reduce stress or anger, it can provide the conditions for these strong emotions to erupt. Soca songs like "Dust Dem (Stampede)" by Kurt Allen (1999), which combine a very fast tempo with forceful calls sung at the top of the singer's lungs, can at times whip the crowd into a frenzy, and may inadvertently lead some people to become aggressive and quick to engage in a fight on the slightest pretext, for example, being bumped by someone in the middle of their dance or interfering with their dancing space.

The ambivalent relationships of soca to violence can be also recorded in groovy soca, the slower version of this musical genre that revels in sexual expressions and dance movements such as wining. On the one hand, the association of joy and pleasure with soca is achieved to a great extent by the playful attitude soca artists exhibit in many of their song texts, as well as in their dance moves. For example, with a mischievous smile, soca artist Denise Belfon revels in performing sexy, saucy dance movements. She takes pleasure and pride in showing how she can gyrate her waist with absolute control. Whether alone or with a male partner, she enjoys being a jamet[5] on stage, being able to let go, to free herself from social norms of propriety and at the same time to retain control of her space. In turn, many male soca artists often mark the climax of their performance through a series of

Figure 2: From left to right: Super Jigga TC and Destra Garcia, Port of Spain, March, 2012. "Freedom of Expression?" (Photo by the author)

rapid djouk movements (pelvic trusts) synchronized with the pulse of the music. This is usually accompanied by a playful smile, as much for their own pleasure as for that of the crowd. Both female and male artists wine, jump, and run across the stage to infuse the audience with a sense of celebration, joy, and pleasure.

For soca artist Denise Belfon, soca provides a space to play, to celebrate sexuality, to be saucy, and to live intensely in the here and now through focusing on dance and thus the body. Through soca, as she puts it, "I learned about our culture and our music, and about *me* as an individual. I just came out." Having learned while growing up to dance to all sorts of music, including bongo, quadrille, bélè, and the big drum, not only from Trinidad but also from Grenada and St. Lucia where her grandmothers come from, soca has provided her the space to integrate and play with what she calls "my cultural movements." It has led her to value her own knowledge and, in so doing, to become more self-confident. While most soca fans I spoke to do not have Belfon's dancing experience, they also emphasized how dancing soca brings them into a heightened awareness of their bodies and provides a sense of empowerment that gives them at once intense personal pleasure and a visceral sense of togetherness with the crowd.

Songs like "Goodie" or "Kaka Lay Lay," or "Bicycle Wine" by Denise Belfon, "Tempa Wine" by Patrice Roberts and Machel Montano, "Wine Down" by Shurwayne Winchester, or "I Dare You" by Destra Garcia, all engage in play, by inviting audiences to show their dancing skills and to enjoy their own moves, by using sweet talk and by making their partners enjoy the feting mood. Even though soca songs are not often thought of as "songs with lyrics," many of the soca audience members I interviewed associated soca with what are referred to locally as "positive" lyrics, those with uplifting images, and a celebration of sexuality.

On the other hand, the focus on sexy clothes and wining in soca can, at times, trump what feminists often view as women's auto-eroticism and emancipated selves. Instead, women can become subjugated to the male gaze and their bodies objectified. Fights can erupt when a man is seen as wining too closely on what calypsonian "the Mighty Duke" once called another man's "property," that is, his wife or girlfriend (Dikobe 2003). And conversely, while soca provides the space for women to express and enjoy their sexuality publicly, this very public expression of sexuality simultaneously produces the conditions which can make them potential targets of sexual harassment within the soca space and of sexual violence after leaving it.[6]

## Concluding Remarks

As Vigdis Broch-Due writes, "violence is an unruly, upsetting and unsettling topic. It appears as the very anti-thesis to our sense of belonging, so destructive of identity, relationship and lifeworld that the vocabulary of the social seems completely out of place. And yet... violence weaves itself into our tangled ideas of belonging and identity in powerfully social ways" (Broch-Due 2005:17). As I have attempted to show, even a musical practice referred to as "party music" is not immune at some level of being complicit with the violence it opposes. Like many other musical practices, it contains within itself the seeds of particular forms of domination and of aggression. It silences those men and women who do not embrace heterosexuality. At times it encourages the crowd to lose control and simply "Charge" ahead, regardless of others. It sends mixed messages about love by using the vocabulary of aggression (remember the songs by Bunji Garlin with titles like "Preaching War"). It keeps the emancipated potential of women's visibility and freedom of sexual expression at bay by making it clear through lyrics and performance behavior what counts as female desirability in gender relations. It focuses on sexualized bodies and libidinal energies while at the same time ignoring the issues of male harassment and sexual danger even in the space of its own musical performance. Interestingly, soca artists do not seem to recognize the potential conditions for violence that they themselves help to create. Similarly, audience members do not seem to view themselves as participating in aggressive or violent behaviors—be it physical or psychic violence. And there has been a near total absence of discourse in the popular as well as the academic press on the subject.

Yet not only as researchers but also as the narrators of the stories we present, we cannot ignore the fact that musical practices, including party music, are messy, and filled with complex and contradictory messages and outcomes. As Broch-Due (2005:36) remarks, we are simply writing against the grain of widespread yearnings for cosmologies of simplicity, purity, and order, which can put violence in its proper place. The problem... is that we cannot dislodge simplistic stories simply by arguing that they are factually 'wrong' or in want of the necessary complexity. To dislodge a story we must provide a better story: more convincing and more compelling.

Acknowledging the ambivalent relationship that party music has with violence might be a first step in this direction. This is not to say that it should lead us to disregard its more compelling aspects, its potential to engage in self-reflexivity and to explore people's interconnectedness, interdependence, and intersubjectivity. As we have seen, soca music has initiated

various types of collaborations among artists that did not exist before. For many artists and audience members, the sentiments of joy and pleasure that soca works hard to produce have acted as productive forces and cultural resources. Soca helps them to reenergize themselves and simultaneously to engage in sociality through the crowd's physical presence and energy. To use the words of Jamaican philosopher, historian, and dance choreographer Rex Nettleford (1993), soca enables them to perform "inward stretch[ing] and outward reach[ing]." For others, soca helps them fight the anger and depression that can at times lead them to acts of violence. Through soca, they learn to free up and let go, or perhaps more to the point, as Michel Foucault (2003:241) would put it, "to let live."

While I believe it is crucial both to acknowledge the ubiquity of violence even in music such as party music and to recognize how paradoxically it also attempts to fight it, it is equally crucial to go further and ask the hard questions that matter deeply to Trinidadians and Caribbean people at home or abroad. The question for many is, what kinds of future might be envisioned through party music? In my view, rather than focusing on a particular telos, soca music seems predominantly concerned with other issues: what experiences are people *now* willing to share and with whom? And how might *a spirit of conviviality* (Gilroy 2005:xv) enable people's desire for peace to be realized? To what extent might the celebration of life and pleasure *with* people that is so crucial to soca lead artists and audience members to reflect on their individual responsibilities? Hopefully, the opportunities that party music provides for reworking relationships between self and others will not be missed.

## Notes

1. The expression "wave your rag" refers to waving something in the air—it can be any piece of cloth or a flag. Such motion represents a way to mark one's active participation in the show and one's support and loyalty to the artist.

2. My focus on party music's ambivalent relationship to violence was inspired by Richard Burton's brilliant study, *Afro-Creole: Power, Opposition and Play in the Caribbean* (1997), in which the author discusses how many cultural practices in the Caribbean deploy a politics of opposition without actually threatening the power structure. I am grateful to Francesca Hawkins for sharing her insights on soca's ambiguous relation to violence.

3. Garlin refers to the series of bombs that exploded every month between July and October in the densely populated areas of the capital of Port of Spain that year.

For further information, see Habegger 2005.

4. The following excerpt comes from my interviews at the Success Laventille Composite School, October 2007.

5. "Jamet," from the French word "diameter," refers to the "other half or underworld character." Associated with the carnival period between 1860 to the early 1880s, it refers to men and women from the economically deprived rungs of society who used their skills in dance and music to challenge the colonial law and authority. Today this term is used almost exclusively to refer to women who challenge social or moral norms by engaging in daring language, gestures, or behavior.

6. Along the same lines, Natasha Barnes addresses the degree to which women revelers during Trinidad Carnival are empowered in celebrating their sexuality. See her article, "Body Talk: Notes on Women and Spectacle in Contemporary Trinidad Carnival" (2000).

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