

OWEN COGGINS

Brunel University London

Email: [owen.coggins@brunel.ac.uk](mailto:owen.coggins@brunel.ac.uk)

MOLLY GEIDEL

University of Manchester

Email: [molly.geidel@manchester.ac.uk](mailto:molly.geidel@manchester.ac.uk)

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## Daily struggle

*Gender, work and feminist realism in Clean Bandit, Sean Paul, and Anne-Marie's "Rockabye"*

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**ABSTRACT** This article investigates representations of gender and work in the hit 2016 song "Rockabye" by Clean Bandit featuring Sean Paul and Anne-Marie in relation to a new orientation toward care labor and feminine performance we call "feminist realism." Feminist realism, we argue, is a sensibility that calls attention to the disproportionate labor entailed, and risk undertaken, by performances of femininity, while despairing of structural fixes for these problems. The article assesses these issues of gender, sex and work in relation to music and dance in the "Rockabye" song and music video, arguing that the song's depictions of exploited feminine and reproductive labor, reflected in its Nordic-British-Jamaican nexus of production, provide a particularly insightful articulation of feminist realism; we also analyze fan reviews to argue that this message resonated with audiences. Finally the article explores Sean Paul's role as a featured artist on the track and video, drawing out the relationship between his attentiveness to the unsung labor of Jamaican musicians in creating the contemporary dance-pop scene and his support for similarly undervalued women in service work in their "daily struggle" for survival.

**KEYWORDS** featuring, production, labor, reception, gender

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## INTRODUCTION

The #MeToo movement, which became a global phenomenon in 2017, crystallized long-building frustrations with gender inequality and violence, as well as attendant frustrations with the individualized solutions of "leaning in" and otherwise empowering oneself. In contrast with the exuberant pop culture performances of femininity that abounded at the turn of the millennium, from the Spice Girls' proclamations of "girl power" to the sparkling urban playgrounds and unstoppable, stiletto-wearing heroines of *Sex and the City* and *Bridget Jones's Diary*, more recent representations of women's and feminine labor evince a certain exhaustion with the whole enterprise.<sup>1</sup> Popular cultural works since the

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1. While many early post-feminist icons hail from the US and Britain, scholars have convincingly characterized post-feminism as a transnational phenomenon, with regional and local variations beyond the global North. See Simidele Dosekun, *Fashioning Post-feminism: Spectacular Femininity and Transnational Culture* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2020); Muhammad Abdullah and Safer Awan, "Islamic Post-feminism and Muslim Chick-Lit: Coexistence of Conflicting Discourses," *Pakistan Journal of Women's Studies* 24/2 (2017): 93–105.

early 2010s, beginning with Anne-Marie Slaughter's viral 2012 article "Why Women Can't Have It All" and Lena Dunham's HBO series *Girls* that debuted the same year, have cast a skeptical eye on popular visions of feminine empowerment and fulfillment.<sup>2</sup> Popular nonfiction books like Blythe Roberson's *How to Date Men When You Hate Men*, Florence Given's *Women Don't Owe You Pretty*, and Moira Weigel's *Labor of Love* (in which Weigel compares dating to an arduous "unpaid internship") have likewise depicted feminine performance not as an effortless or natural source of pleasure and play but rather as exhausting, frustrating work.<sup>3</sup> In her 2021 interview with Oprah Winfrey, Meghan Markle similarly characterized even her seeming fairytale Duchess of Sussex role as a job in a discriminatory and unregulated workplace ("in my old job," she told Winfrey, "there was a union and they would protect me").<sup>4</sup> Such now-commonplace complaints, which Anne Helen Petersen reads as evidence of "post-feminist dystopia" and Asa Seresin has called "hetero-pessimism," extend #MeToo's critiques of workplace power imbalances into the realms of sex, dating and marriage, arguing that feminine performance is labor not just in the workplace, but also in romantic and family life.<sup>5</sup>

This popular attention to the labor of femininity poses a challenge to the post-feminist sensibility Angela McRobbie and Rosalind Gill identified in the mid-aughts to describe the aforementioned playful cultural sensibility that took hold in that era. Post-feminism, these scholars posit, entails a consumerist and individualistic orientation characterized by a sense of irony, play, individual resilience, and what Gill calls "femininity as bodily property," in which empowerment is attained through knowing performances of sexualized femininity, performances that second-wave feminists would have critiqued as objectifying and shaped by the male gaze.<sup>6</sup> As McRobbie argues, post-feminism acknowledges feminism, accepting as common sense the idea of women's empowerment while rejecting the movement's wider goal of societal transformation, so that "young women are able to come forward on condition that feminism fades away."<sup>7</sup> More recently, Gill, has argued that post-feminism's importance as an analytical category persists even in an era when feminism again seems ubiquitous, as media and popular emphases on individual

2. Anne-Marie Slaughter, "Why Women Still Can't Have it All," *The Atlantic* (July/August 2012) <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2012/07/why-women-still-cant-have-it-all/309020/>.

3. Blythe Roberson, *How to Date Men When You Hate Men* (New York: Flatiron Books, 2019); Florence Given, *Women Don't Owe You Pretty* (London: Cassell, 2020); Moira Weigel, *Labor of Love: The Invention of Dating* (New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 2016).

4. Juliana Kaplan, "Meghan Markle's Interview with Oprah highlighted the importance of unions," *Business Insider* (8 Mar 2021) <https://www.businessinsider.com/meghan-markle-prince-harry-oprah-interview-highlighted-importance-of-unions-2021-3?r=US&IR=T#:~:text=Because%20in%20my%20old%20job,%22>

5. Anne Helen Petersen, "In 'Trainwreck,' Amy Schumer Calls Bullshit On Post-feminism," *Buzzfeed News* (18 July 2015) <https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/annehelenpetersen/postfeminist-bullshit>; Asa Seresin, "On Heteropessimism," *The New Inquiry* (9 Oct 2019) <https://thenewinquiry.com/on-heteropessimism/>. Angela McRobbie observed similar yet perhaps less popularly intelligible phenomena in 2009, labeling them "post-feminist disorders." See McRobbie, *The Aftermath of Feminism: Gender, Culture and Social Change* (London: Sage publishing, 2009), esp. pp. 94–123.

6. Rosalind Gill, "Post-feminist media culture: Elements of a sensibility," *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, 10/2 (2007): 149–50

7. Angela McRobbie, "Top Girls: Young women and the post-feminist sexual contract," *Cultural Studies* 21/4-5 (2009): 720.

empowerment, positive affects (such as “body confidence”) and the propertization of femininity coexist with new expressions of feminist discontent.<sup>8</sup> In what follows we extend Gill’s insights about recent entanglements of feminism and post-feminism, identifying a sensibility we call “feminist realism,” following Mark Fisher’s “capitalist realism.”<sup>9</sup> Eschewing both radical feminism’s anti-patriarchal vision and post-feminism’s celebratory reclamation of the trappings of femininity and domesticity under the signs of play and agency, feminist realism adopts a modest harm reduction approach, wishing for a world in which men behave more respectfully toward women, who continue to perform under- or un-compensated sexual and reproductive labor.

In what follows we analyze a particularly rich articulation of feminist realism: the global hit song “Rockabye,” a collaboration between white British electronic pop band Clean Bandit (composed of a woman and two men), white female British singer Anne-Marie, and black/multiracial male Jamaican dancehall/pop star Sean Paul. Released in October 2016, “Rockabye” has since sold millions of digital and physical copies, reached No.1 in more than 30 countries, and received more than 2.5 billion views on YouTube as of July 2021. Concerned centrally with the working conditions of women in the service and entertainment industries, the “Rockabye” song and video present the performance of feminine sexuality as neither morally problematic nor straightforwardly empowering. This depiction of feminine performance as labor is compellingly advanced in the song by Sean Paul, who has developed a prolific practice of “featuring” as a guest star on women artists’ tracks. We argue that Sean Paul’s general attentiveness to the global music industry’s propensity for appropriating the creative labor of Jamaican artists, as well as the particular way he has transformed the “featuring” role into a supportive mode of accompaniment in his songs with numerous, mostly female vocalists, allow him in “Rockabye” to embody a convincingly supportive and understanding presence as he accentuates the “daily struggle” of the song’s protagonist. But while Sean Paul’s performance draws attention to the arduous and exploitative labor women perform in the service and entertainment industries (and the disproportionate care labor they perform at home), “Rockabye” ultimately articulates the diminished ambition that we identify as feminist realism, its sense that sexual and reproductive labor will neither disappear nor be more equally shared anytime soon.

In our use of a hit pop song and video to assess the nuances of this sensibility, we take our cue from Robin James, who argues that EDM pop songs formally and lyrically articulate neoliberal post-feminist resilience.<sup>10</sup> Pop songs, James argues, sound the post-feminist imperative that women constantly engage in a “practice of extracting surplus value from damage or crisis,” energetically reiterating and embodying the notion, per Kelly Clarkson, that “what doesn’t kill you makes you stronger.”<sup>11</sup> By examining the

8. Rosalind Gill, “Post-post-feminism?: new feminist visibilities in post-feminist times,” *Feminist Media Studies*, 16/4 (2016): 610–30.

9. Mark Fisher, *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?* (London, Zero Books, 2009).

10. Robin James, *Resilience and Melancholy: Pop Music, Feminism, Neoliberalism* (London, Zed Books, 2015).

11. Robin James, “Resilience and melancholy: Post-feminist pop and its discontent,” in *IASPM-US*, January 26 [iaspm-us.net/resilience-melancholy-post-feminist-pop-its-discontents-by-robin-james/](http://iaspm-us.net/resilience-melancholy-post-feminist-pop-its-discontents-by-robin-james/).

production context, themes, cover image, musical structure and music video for “Rockabye” (with particular emphasis on Sean Paul’s feature), we show that the song’s feminist realist sensibility can be understood as a partial break from the post-feminist resilience imperative James describes. The narrative of “Rockabye” is one of a hard-working, single mother, the song is upbeat and catchy, and the video shows some arguably liberatory tropes (such as the protagonist dancing alone in a beautiful natural setting). Yet rather than depicting a defiantly successful survivor, the song lingers on the damage done by patriarchal structures at work and at home, infusing the depiction of the protagonist’s resilience with a somber tone; the video complements this feminist realist sensibility through its depiction of the protagonist’s visible discomfort while leaving work past some of the pub’s clientele. This sense of compromise is shared by fans and amateur reviewers, whose comments we also incorporate into our analysis.<sup>12</sup> Taking inspiration from Sarah Banet-Weiser who, following Stuart Hall, argues that feminism, since it has in recent years become a popular culture, constitutes “a terrain of struggle over meaning,” we explore “Rockabye” fan responses in order to understand the melancholic orientation of feminist realism toward ongoing exploitative labor, as well as the way fans and critics have used the song and video to interpret their own experiences of harassment and exploitation.<sup>13</sup>

#### GLOBAL FLOWS AND INDUSTRIAL PRODUCTION

“Rockabye” tells the story of a single mother doing an unspecified form of sex work to support her small child. The song’s third-person verses tell a developing tale of the mother’s struggle to raise her growing child, introducing a protagonist who “works the nights by the water” because she “just wants a life for her baby,” then flashing forward to when the child is six years old, and the mother is still “trying to keep him warm, trying to keep out the cold.” Meanwhile, the choruses take on the protagonist’s voice, singing a lullaby directly to her son, its repetitions evoking a cyclical, ritual *Kairos* in relation to the linear progression of the verses. Throughout each verse-chorus pattern, the overall pitch of the voice rises steadily, coinciding with a change in lyrical focus from the external narrative of hardship to the musically articulated bond between mother and child. Sean Paul’s interjections and rapped interludes comprise a further perspective, in lyrics directed to the protagonist. Musically the song combines the violin and cello used in other Clean

12. While “Rockabye” has proved a massive worldwide hit, pop singles do not tend to receive the volume of critical responses as rock music has historically attracted. Coverage consists of a small number of amateur reviews of the single or video, news pieces about the song claiming the coveted “Christmas Number One” UK chart position, or brief mentions in (generally lukewarm) press reviews of the album *What is Love*, released in 2018. The largest available source for direct audience responses to the song are user comments on YouTube postings of different versions of the song (including live renditions by different combinations of the contributing artists, and cover versions). More than 250,000 user comments are posted on the primary YouTube posting of the official music video. These offer partial but significant evidence of how the song and its presentation of work and gender are received.

13. Sarah Banet-Weiser, *Empowered: Popular Feminism and Popular Misogyny* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2018), 15; Stuart Hall, “Notes on deconstructing ‘the popular,’” *People’s History and Socialist Theory*, ed. R. Samuel (London: Kegan Paul and Routledge, 1981), 231–39.

Bandit tracks with electronic pop components, such as programmed drums, “chopped” vocal notes and Caribbean sonic elements, most clearly a synthetic steelpan sound used throughout.

Both the hybrid sound of “Rockabye” and the labor depicted within it are shaped by, and to some extent also comment on, the conditions of a global pop music industry that not only trades on the dreams of young women while appropriating their creative labor, but also relies on a sound and song structure invented by uncredited Jamaican artists. In his book *The Song Machine*, John Seabrook traces the rise of this transnational production process and style, which proceeds as follows: almost-always-male European and American producers formulate a beat and chord structure; then hook writers, often African American women “top-liners,” write melodic hooks; and finally the producers give the song to a (usually young, female) singer. This Caribbean-Scandinavian production nexus, and the track-and-hook method it pioneers, is exemplified by the 2010 Rihanna hit “Rude Boy,” the song Seabrook identifies as the “apotheosis” of the contemporary hit factory sound.<sup>14</sup> Written by Norwegian producer duo Stargate in collaboration with black US-based topliner Ester Dean (whose dreams of recording her own songs are subordinated to the demands of the hit factory), “Rude Boy,” Seabrook claims, is “the perfect hybrid of Nordic and urban,” in which “crystalline synth chords lift the song from its crude lyrical context” and “a Scandinavian snowfall filters down over a sweaty Caribbean drum circle.”<sup>15</sup> Seabrook’s racial essentialist description exemplifies the neocolonial dynamics of the hit factory itself, in which white Scandinavians task themselves with refining raw black Caribbean sound, consistently equating Caribbean sound and performers with unbridled sexuality and “rudeness” that needs to be properly channeled in order to produce a hit for the global market. Petra Rivera-Rideau and Jericko Torres-Leschenik have described this aspect of multinational music production, with reference to the worldwide hit “Despacito,” as a dynamic of “tropicalization,” one that continues to associate blackness and Afro-diasporic sounds with hypersexuality while positioning white producers and collaborators as the necessary refining elements.<sup>16</sup> “Rude Boy” exemplifies this process of tropicalization, watering down and synthing up Caribbean dancehall rhythms and women’s vocal labor through the filter of Scandinavian production control. The lyrics demonstrate how non-Jamaican writers bestow a purely sexual meaning (“Rude Boy, can you get it up”) on the figure of the rude boy that historically in Jamaica represented class antagonism as opposed to sexual prowess.<sup>17</sup>

“Rockabye”’s production process exemplifies but also to some degree calls attention to and disrupts these hit factory processes of racist tropicalization and subordinating women’s creative labor. Ina Wroldsen, a Norwegian singer who has worked with Stargate and written hits for Shakira and other international stars, wrote the bulk of the song, drawing on her experience as the mother of a young son to imagine the experiences of

14. John Seabrook, *The Song Machine: How to Make a Hit* (London, Vintage, 2015), 227.

15. Ibid.

16. Petra Rivera-Rideau and Jericko Torres-Lechnik, “The Colors and Flavors of My Puerto Rico: Mapping “Despacito”’s Crossovers,” *Journal of Popular Music Studies* 31/1 (2019): 87–108.

17. Lloyd Bradley, *Bass Culture: When Reggae Was King* (London: Penguin, 2000).

a single mother: “her husband’s a joker but he’s still there!” Clean Bandit keyboardist Jack Patterson explains.<sup>18</sup> Though Wroldsen’s song chronicles the unsung unpaid disproportionate reproductive labor of a young single mother, she herself, as the dynamics of the hit factory so often dictate, was erased from the song during the production process. She had planned to sing the song with Clean Bandit before the band’s record label replaced her with the younger, white British singer Anne-Marie. Clean Bandit attempted to contest this before giving in, as reported in an interview with the band’s cellist (and sole female member), Grace Chatto:

“It was a terrible situation and I fought with people for a couple of months and in the end there was nothing we could do,” recalls Chatto. “I did feel like I couldn’t do it any more because the idea that my business was hurting people . . . that was really painful. I went completely crazy for a while after that. I just had to carry on, but inside it was really hard.”<sup>19</sup>

Chatto’s capitulation and attempt to offset professional and economic damage by publicly demonstrating anguished feelings signals another moment of feminist (and capitalist) realism by the band: they decide to weather the pain of exploiting the female writer of a song about the exploitation of women’s affective, sexual and creative labor.

The presence of Sean Paul on “Rockabye,” however, complicates its relationship to the labor and racial dynamics of the hit factory. To some degree, the producers of “Rockabye” attempt to use Sean Paul to the same effect as in other hit factory productions, drawing on stereotypical associations of Caribbean sound with hypersexuality to compound the erasure of Wroldsen’s labor. But in interviews, Sean Paul shows thoughtfulness about this structure of exploitation and his role in the hit factory machine: he often articulates how his class background has allowed him to cross over globally because of his less “hardcore Patois,” explaining that “I’m able to speak in a little tongue where someone can understand me,” and he critiques stars who appropriate dancehall sounds without “putting accolades towards the whole culture.”<sup>20</sup> Sean Paul’s rapping/toasting vocals in the song, written by Sean Paul himself, build on this sensibility, exposing rather than smoothly replicating the exploitative system of the hit factory, and to some extent upending its conventions. These vocals direct listeners’ attention to the unsung labor of the single-mother protagonist, itself a proxy for the unsung labor of Wroldsen and her erasure from

18. Rita Zimmerman, “Clean Bandit say ‘Rockabye’ was inspired by ‘real experience’ of the song’s co-writer”, in *ABC Radio Online* (May 18, 2017), [abcnewsradioonline.com/music-news/2017/5/18/clean-bandit-say-rockabye-was-inspired-by-real-experience-of.html](http://abcnewsradioonline.com/music-news/2017/5/18/clean-bandit-say-rockabye-was-inspired-by-real-experience-of.html). Sean Paul, Clean Bandit keyboardist Jack Patterson, and Ammar Malik and Steve Mac, professional songwriters with co-writing credits on many hits, also are credited with writing the song.

19. Michael Cragg, “Clean Bandit: Britain’s biggest pop group on Labor, Israel and female masturbation,” in *The Guardian Online* (November 23, 2018), [www.theguardian.com/music/2018/nov/23/clean-bandit-britains-biggest-pop-group](http://www.theguardian.com/music/2018/nov/23/clean-bandit-britains-biggest-pop-group).

20. Cherry Wilson, “Sean Paul: ‘Language barrier’ a problem for dancehall artists,” in *BBC.com* (July 3, 2019), [www.bbc.co.uk/news/newsbeat-48717846](http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/newsbeat-48717846); Deviant Noise, “Sean Paul Says Drake, Ed Sheeran Need to Give Dancehall More Props,” <https://news.deviantnoise.com/sean-paul-says-drake-ed-sheeran-need-give-dancehall-props/>

the song. His vocals also underscore the unsung labor of the Jamaican artists who created the sonic formula that global dance pop now follows, making visible a reliance on Jamaican style that is often hidden or “refined” through the mechanisms of the global hit factory.

The cover design for the CD single edition of “Rockabye,” a collage by artist Rita Zimmerman, previews the track’s attention to both “hit factory” and reproductive labor. The cover image features a seated white baby wearing a knitted cardigan, whose head is replaced with a giant green eye (or specifically, iris). This cyclops baby is superimposed on a blue-tinted aerial photograph of the Renaissance Center in Detroit, a vast riverside commercial building that served as the headquarters for General Motors; one fan concludes convincingly that the photo dates from the 1970s.<sup>21</sup> This image of Detroit evokes not only assembly-line car manufacturing and its vast system of resource and labor extraction, but also the “hit factory” of Motown: Berry Gordy’s careful cultivation of Motown’s image, to the point of callously switching out singers (Florence Ballard of the Supremes being a famous instance), prefigures the more fully global industrialized music system Seabrook traces. By bringing into relation the white baby and the image evocative of Gordy’s hit factory, the cover reveals this continuity within the present, inviting listeners to consider not just the continuity in the practice of treating singers like cogs in the “song machine,” but also the practice of “cleaning up” black musical forms, as Motown did, by tying them to white middle-class respectability, so that they might be successfully marketed to white audiences.<sup>22</sup> In this way, the white factory-backed baby also evokes the hit factory’s marketing and repackaging of Afro-Caribbean styles and sounds by white (and occasionally non-white) European and American producers.

Whereas the cover image’s references to past and present “song machines” are available to fans who search for them (as some do), the cover is not exactly a critique, or at least a coherent one, of the hit factory. Rather, given the band’s stated enthusiasm for the “factory” production process and Chatto’s often curiously naïve descriptions of the capitalist productions in which they are involved, indicating the band’s preference to view work as frictionless creative play—her sadness and faux sense of powerlessness at Wroldsen’s removal a case in point—the image of a white baby superimposed on Detroit seems more like a celebratory gesture than a conscientious one. Looking back to their roots, Clean Bandit seem to be constructing themselves as the giant white baby heirs of the “hit factory” tradition.

But what of the giant green eye that comprises the third element of the collage? This eye invokes the dilemma that confronts any contemporary attempt to re-envision feminism beyond power struggles at work and the ongoing crisis of care: namely, what to do with the constant surveillance and self-surveillance that has characterized both pre- and post-feminist culture, and how and whether it is still possible to claim to be performing

21. Bernieboy. “Does anyone know the significance of this album cover?,” *Reddit* (November 3, 2016). [www.reddit.com/r/Detroit/comments/5ayocx/does\\_anyone\\_know\\_the\\_significance\\_of\\_this\\_album/](http://www.reddit.com/r/Detroit/comments/5ayocx/does_anyone_know_the_significance_of_this_album/)

22. Suzanne E. Smith, *Dancing in the Street: Motown and the Cultural Politics of Detroit* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999).

feminine sexuality “for oneself.” In “Rockabye,” these questions of surveillance are engaged mainly by the music video, in which the performance of the pole-dancer protagonist under the male gaze is repeatedly contrasted with the possibility of more fulfilling pole-dancing outside it.

#### REPRESENTING AND PERFORMING THE WORK OF MUSIC AND DANCE

In telling the story of a sex worker laboring because she “just wants a life for her baby,” “Rockabye” stakes out a position beyond either censorious judgment or entrepreneurial sex-positive reclamation of feminine sexuality, finding a partial solution to the protagonist’s “daily struggle” in asking listeners to identify with her. This position of neither judgmental lament nor post-feminist exuberant celebration of sex work constitutes the feminist realist sensibility we have been tracing here. If in the last section we demonstrated how the song’s thematic concerns and cover art call attention to the exploitative conditions of its own production and of the larger “hit factory” that also produced it, here we plumb those contradictions further, arguing that the song and its video’s somewhat melancholic and resigned orientation allow it to position sex and entertainment-industry work *as work*, while also imagining the structure that apports this work to be immovable (but also that one might be able to create space within it for fulfilling performance “for oneself”).

The music video, conceived and directed by Chatto, goes even further than the song in revising post-feminist imperatives to sex positivity, translating the sex work implied in the song into a job pole dancing for male pubgoers. The video follows the song’s protagonist, played by professional dancer Rita Maria Conte, as she clocks in and out of work and pole-dances in a pub in front of ten or so seated leering men; these scenes of Conte uncomfortably laboring under a sexist gaze, underscored by lyrics suggesting she is doing “what I got to do” to support her son, are juxtaposed with others in which she spends time with her son and pole dances alone, acrobatically, on the top of a cliff and in a forest. The video emphasizes the difficulty of the dancer’s labor in one moment when she leaves the pub after work: she walks past a man with a pint glass who leers at her, as the lyrics voice the phrase “got to do.” The transition represents how the small joy of leaving the workplace is immediately crowded out by the sexism and objectification that impinge on the dancer’s life at and beyond work: doing what she has got to do involves dealing with these structures outside as well as in the workplace.

In the music video medium, whose most basic component from its 1980s inception has been the happily gyrating woman, such an admission that women’s sex work and its visual corollary, pole dancing for men, might entail fear, embarrassment, and inconvenience is rare. These emotions are conveyed further in another scene of the protagonist leaving the pub that underlines her unhappiness at being leered at and harassed by pubgoers; she walks swiftly past them with downcast gaze and defensive posture, holding her jacket protectively close. One reviewer notes the strange discomfort of being implicated as a spectator, observing that the video “connects the audience watching the video



with the men, which no matter how true, is very unpleasant.”<sup>23</sup> By contrast, many YouTube commentators appreciate the scene’s perspectival switch, as exemplified by this commentator who uses the scene to hail a community of female viewers:

@3.17 [time stamp in the video]—rushing out of the bar and having to pass through those men—we’ve all been there, that’s the exact body language we all use: arms close to your body, head down, gaze low but still aware of your surroundings, move quickly get to your car/busy street/bus stop as inconspicuously as possible. All too familiar.<sup>24</sup>

The line “we’ve all been there” is typical of the majority of the thousands of YouTube comments on the “Rockabye” video. Rather than isolating the protagonist or questioning her participation in sex work, such comments enfold the protagonist into a community of women, or perhaps more accurately a community of those vulnerable to the potentially menacing collective male gaze: another commentator responds to a criticism of the protagonist with “Dancers aren’t prostitutes . . . and even if they were, sex work is still work. Show some respect.”<sup>25</sup>

“Rockabye” and its fans thus tend to recognize sex work as an economic choice that is sometimes unpleasant and difficult. This understanding of sex work as hard work that is neither morally wrong nor generally enjoyable, shared by the acclaimed contemporaneous indie film *The Florida Project* (2017), seems far from the moralizing of a work such as the Oscar-winning imperialist rescue film *Born into Brothels* (2004), in which sex-worker mothers are automatically assumed to be harming their children. It also, however, diverges from the mid-2000s heyday of what Ariel Levy (also moralistically) called “raunch culture,” a moment when pornography, pole-dancing, and other kinds of feminine sexual performance were heralded as straightforwardly empowering for women.<sup>26</sup> The portrayals of sex work in “Rockabye” are more in line with the sensibility of recent work by Juno Mac and Molly Smith, who eschew both moralizing and sex positivity as unhelpful in agitating for sex workers’ rights, and instead “assert the right for all women to be ‘sex-ambivalent.’”<sup>27</sup>

Such “sex ambivalence” characterizes the “Rockabye” video. While the pub scenes emphasize the sometimes unpleasant and performative labor of economically necessary sex work, the video’s outdoor scenes of Conte pole dancing, far from the leering men, attempt to reconnect beauty and sexuality with confidence and freedom. At points in the video, a curtain lifts in the bar, revealing a sunlit coastal scene, where Conte dances on a pole. On the cliff, she still dances “by the water” but in a non-industrialized, natural setting. No one is in sight except for the three Clean Bandit musicians who play instruments without watching the dancer. During these sequences Anne-Marie’s singing

23. DK, “Rockabye by Clean Bandit,” *Medium*, (December 10, 2016), [medium.com/@destootoo/review-of-clean-bandits-rockabye-faf86a91827e](https://medium.com/@destootoo/review-of-clean-bandits-rockabye-faf86a91827e).

24. Comment by Aa Bb, Clean Bandit 2016.

25. Comment by Schoolstuff, Clean Bandit 2016.

26. Ariel Levy, *Female Chauvinist Pigs: Women and the Rise of Raunch Culture* (London: Simon & Schuster, 2005).

27. Juno Mac and Molly Smith, *Revolting Prostitutes: The Fight for Sex Workers’ Rights* (London: Verso, 2018), 22.

ascends. The combination of the natural setting and the absence of an audience (except viewers of the video) contrasts markedly with the relentless gaze of the men in the pub: the video's lifting of the curtain thus marks the distinction between dance as work done for others' entertainment and dance as self-fulfilling creative practice. Chatto describes this structure as juxtaposing "the mundane reality of being in a job you might not like" with "a kind of fantasy world with the joy that dancing can bring you."<sup>28</sup> This ambivalence is communicated to at least one viewer, who describes the bar scenes as "plain and awkward" in contrast to the outdoor scenes in which "it's an art as she stretches and bends her body in unusual shapes."<sup>29</sup>

Conte's clothes reinforce the implications of the video's contrasting settings. In the bar, Conte wears fishnet tights and thick plexiglass high heels; in the forest, she is barefoot and in plainer (though still somewhat revealing) athletic leisurewear. This shift reflects what Dana Fennell calls "pole[-dancing]'s movement into the field of fitness" over the course of the 2000s, a movement that has led to divisions in the pole-dancing world between more erotic and more athletic styles. High-heeled shoes have been a particular focal point in this debate, sometimes leading to "further stigmatization of exotic dancers."<sup>30</sup> Fennell details how studio pole-dancing classes marked as sexy or erotic "often did not require previous skill in poling and would sometimes incorporate high-heeled shoes like those exotic dancers wear."<sup>31</sup> Conte herself, as her extraordinary skill makes clear, is at home in the competitive pole-dancing world, and Chatto claims that Conte, a single mother, inspired the video.<sup>32</sup> More generally, the video's characterization of the shedding of high heels as potentially emancipatory carries symbolic power, since the high heel has become the most recognizable synecdoche for post-feminist experiments in empowerment through feminine performance.<sup>33</sup>

The fantasy sections of the video depict neither exploitative unpleasant labor conditions nor sexual objectification by leering men. Instead, in these scenes, dance appears as self-fulfillment, and the music of "Rockabye" reaches greater and more improvisatory heights, while abandoning narrative and language. The dancer's son is not present in three out of four of these sections, hinting that although the protagonist's sex work is motivated by her desire to care for her child, her creative expression through dance, at its best, can allow her to find a form of freedom that is not contingent on her role as mother. But

28. Rob LeDonne, "Clean Bandit's Grace Chatto talks global smash 'Rockabye,' premiers Autograf Remix: exclusive," *Billboard* (January 26, 2017), [www.billboard.com/articles/news/dance/7669736/clean-bandits-rockabye-interview-autograf-remix-2017](http://www.billboard.com/articles/news/dance/7669736/clean-bandits-rockabye-interview-autograf-remix-2017).

29. I Want My Pop Culture, "Video review: Clean Bandit, Sean Paul & Anne-Marie, 'Rockabye'" (December 31, 2016). [iwantmypopculture.com/2016/12/31/video-review-clean-bandit-sean-paul-anne-marie-rockabye/](http://iwantmypopculture.com/2016/12/31/video-review-clean-bandit-sean-paul-anne-marie-rockabye/).

30. Dana Fennell, "Pole studios as spaces between the adult entertainment, art, fitness and sporting fields," *Sport and Society*, 21/12 (2018): 1960. See also Kerry Griffiths, *Femininity, Feminism and Recreational Pole-dancing* (London: Routledge, 2015) and Samantha Holland, *Pole-dancing, Empowerment and Embodiment* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010).

31. Fennell, "Pole Studios," 1964.

32. Clean Bandit "ROCKABYE BIRTHDAY WEEK ok a . . .," *Twitter.com* (October 22, 2018). [twitter.com/cleanbandit/status/1054489660876038144?](https://twitter.com/cleanbandit/status/1054489660876038144?)

33. Pamela Butler and Jigna Desai, "Manolos, Marriage, and Mantras: Chick-Lit Criticism and Transnational Feminism" in *Meridians: feminism, race, transnationalism*, 8/2 (2008): 1-31.

there remains some ambivalence in these sequences, as Chatto indicates, “You really don’t know if she’s fallen in love with pole-dancing or if she’s just living in a dream world.”<sup>34</sup> These chorus sections, then, teeter between representing the dancer’s potential arrival at self-fulfillment through creative labor, and, in contrast, illustrating her desperate reliance on escapist fantasy in order to survive the oppressive realities of her working conditions. Here the video not only provides a fantasy within the narrative of the pop song but hints at potential social functions of the pop song itself.

Ultimately, however, “Rockabye” suggests movement beyond escapist fantasy, fulfillment or resilience, instead visualizing a precarity that requires the enactment of collective support. The song’s title, chorus and melody reference the lullaby “Rock-a-bye baby,” widely known in the Anglophone world as lullaby for rocking small children to sleep since at least the eighteenth century. The lullaby and the song’s chorus both begin with the five syllables “Rock-a-bye baby,” but the song postpones the peak in pitch by one note. In the lullaby, the highest note is the syllable “bye,” followed by falling through “baby.” In “Rockabye,” the highest note in the analogous line that Anne-Marie sings is the first syllable of “baby.” This changes the sense from rocking and falling (“down will come baby, cradle and all”) in the lullaby, to an emphasis on ascent, a literally uplifting feeling in theme and melody that evokes progress, achievement, and fulfillment. This connection between affirmation and height is supported by Sean Paul’s lines—“Stay up there, stay up there” and “Lift up your head, lift it up to the sky”—which at times present an almost comical literalism when accompanying images of Conte dancing high up on a pole. Similarly, in brief shots showing mother and son swinging on playground swings during the chorus, they are only seen moving on upward trajectories. This “uplifting” movement throughout the song echoes James’s ideas about the resilience imperative to “recycle damage” that drives so much contemporary pop.<sup>35</sup> But the shadow-lyrics of the nursery rhyme, reinforced by the chronicle of exhaustion and difficulty for the mother throughout, voiced primarily by Sean Paul, are reminders of the possibility that the mother and baby may not, in fact, be able to “stay up there.”

These lines, in conjunction with Conte’s positioning, also indicate that the chorus of “Rockabye” is not ultimately or only addressed to the child. If the song is on one level an articulation of the protagonist’s heroic lonely resilience, the refrain “somebody’s got you” in connection with Conte’s position up “on the treetops” also transforms the song into a pledge, or even a collective performance, of support for her. The restoration of the protagonist’s confidence and freedom in the video does not happen through solitary reverie or exercising personal responsibility, but rather through the visible and audible participation of a supportive community. All five musicians have roles in the video which open out from the diegetic: they are all present in the video’s narrative set in the pub (Anne-Marie as barmaid and singer, Clean Bandit as the band and as dancers, and Sean Paul as a bystander who dances and raps) in roles that overlap with their “real-life” contributions to the collaboration. A precisely synchronized moment of solidarity occurs

34. LeDonne, “Clean Bandit’s Grace Chatto talks global smash ‘Rockabye,’ premiers Autograf Remix: exclusive.”

35. James, *Resilience and Melancholy*.

where the first voicing of the phrase “good life” in the lyrics coincides exactly with Conte’s character’s arrival at work: she gives barmaid Anne-Marie a smile and friendly pat on the shoulder, expressing physical touch as friendship and mutual support between women workers. While the phrase “good life” is part of the mother’s promise to her child that he will “grow and have a good life” in contrast to her current conditions, this moment of care is also a temporary, supportive respite from the “daily struggle.”

It is Sean Paul’s verses, however, directed toward and connecting with the single mother as opposed to the child, that primarily create this sense of support. While the lyrics Anne-Marie sings occasionally approach the judgmental (most clearly in the convoluted line “She’s gone astray so far away from her father’s daughter”) or celebrate the selflessness of the single mother, Sean Paul’s contribution returns the song’s focus to the experience of everyday work and “going through frustration.” Sean Paul’s role as a long-time advocate for unsung labor, we suggest below, allows him to construct a “featuring” role that can model solidarity and popular education, at least in the limited terms of feminist realism.

#### SEAN PAUL’S SUPPORTING ROLES

Several reviewers see incongruity in Sean Paul’s feature in relation to “Rockabye”’s theme of single motherhood. They sometimes view his participation in the song with suspicion, assuming that he was included as part of a label-mandated decision on branding, rather than on creative grounds: his collaborators must have been “forced into it,” one reviewer speculates.<sup>36</sup> Other commentators, frequently without any supporting evidence, suggest that Sean Paul’s mere presence undermines the song’s supportive message to single mothers. One reviewer claims that Clean Bandit’s songs are “riddled with counterintuitive combinations,” offering the example of “Sean Paul singing about the sacrifices of single mothers on mega-hit Rockabye.”<sup>37</sup> Another commentator asks, “What’s Sean Paul doing here? Where does the aggressive club dancer fit into this small-scale story of motherhood and intimate spaces?” before finding that “surprisingly, he fits into a support role,” observing this in the way Sean Paul “provid[es] little utterances to emphasize various parts of her story” and “little filler sounds to show that he’s still listening.”<sup>38</sup> The reviewer ultimately praises Sean Paul’s contribution for “the way that it falls into the background and doesn’t impose itself upon the main narrative thread,” communicating

36. James Barker, “Review: Clean Bandit feat. Sean Paul & Anne-Marie – Rockabye,” *The Edge Susu*, (November 15, 2016), [www.theedgesusu.co.uk/records/singles/2016/11/15/review-clean-bandit-feat-sean-paul-anne-marie-rockabye/](http://www.theedgesusu.co.uk/records/singles/2016/11/15/review-clean-bandit-feat-sean-paul-anne-marie-rockabye/).

37. Rachel Aroesti, “Clean Bandit: What Is Love? review – Underwhelming chart catnip,” *The Guardian* (November 30, 2018) [www.theguardian.com/music/2018/nov/30/clean-bandit-what-is-love-review-underwhelming-chart-catnip](http://www.theguardian.com/music/2018/nov/30/clean-bandit-what-is-love-review-underwhelming-chart-catnip).

38. The Written Tevs, “A no. 1 review: ‘Rockabye’ by Clean Bandit feat. Sean Paul & Anne-Marie (plus a lot of other things Sean Paul featured in last year),” in *The Written Tevs Blog* (April 19, 2017) [thewrittentevs.wordpress.com/2017/04/19/a-no-1-review-rockabye-by-clean-bandit-feat-sean-paul-anne-marie-plus-a-lot-of-other-things-sean-paul-featured-in-last-year/](http://thewrittentevs.wordpress.com/2017/04/19/a-no-1-review-rockabye-by-clean-bandit-feat-sean-paul-anne-marie-plus-a-lot-of-other-things-sean-paul-featured-in-last-year/).

that “men can help but they can do so by listening, emphasizing and supporting women, not by imposing their ideologies onto them.”<sup>39</sup>

We share the conclusion at which this final reviewer eventually arrives: Sean Paul’s feature in “Rockabye” amounts to a solidarity performance, characterized by his supportive interactive interjections and his exhortations to men to understand and sympathize with the difficulty of reproductive labor. Throughout the song, Sean Paul raps and sings to the protagonist, punctuating Anne-Marie’s narrative with interjections such as “daily struggle” and the aforementioned “stay up there”; his rapped interludes also link the verse and chorus, encouraging the single mother and explicating her plight. Drawing on a long-standing reverence in dancehall for mothers and women’s reproductive sexuality, evident in songs like Bounty Killer’s “Mama (Scare Dem Version)” (1996), Sizzla’s “Thank U Ma” (2003), and Capleton’s “Love Mama” (2001) and “Mama You Strong” (2010), Sean Paul’s performance in “Rockabye” combines this reverence with the limited-feminist framework we’ve been tracking (in which women’s perspectives on affective and reproductive labor are foregrounded) to create a supportive vocal presence. The song finds him listening to and interacting with female singers about their labor, difficulties, and frustrations, while in the video he attempts to educate men (in this case white English pubgoers) about these experiences.

The initial surprise of many reviewers at Sean Paul’s participation in “Rockabye” indicates how his solidarity performance challenges racist stereotypes that attribute sexism solely or predominantly to working-class men of color or men in the global South or to hip hop and dancehall cultures.<sup>40</sup> The reviewers’ surprise is also connected with the history of the feature, which has replaced the duet and backup singing as the primary structure through which musicians collaborate. “Featuring” originated in early-1990s male cross-genre collaborations. Industry scholars identify Glenn Medeiros’s 1990 number one rock-rap hit “She Ain’t Worth It,” featuring Bobby Brown, as the song that “established the commercial potency of creative collaborations *across* genres in an industry accustomed to marketing products *within* genre.”<sup>41</sup> Building on the formula established by Aerosmith and Run-DMC’s hit 1986 rap-rock collaboration “Walk This Way,” “She Ain’t Worth It” established a new form of male musical cross-genre unity founded on mutual disdain for the song’s female subject. Reviewers’ confusion at Sean Paul’s role thus stems, in part, from the lack of “aggression” and misogyny in his feature. Sean Paul, however, has pioneered a featuring role that, at least since his 2003 smash hit with Beyoncé “Baby Boy,” diverges from the feature’s traditional dismissal of women. On that track and on Blu Cantrell’s “Breathe,” and even on his own tracks with other artists, such as “I’m Still In Love With You,” up through his popular 2016 collaboration with Sia “Cheap Thrills” (as well in their 2021 follow-up “Dynamite”), Sean Paul’s features

39. Ibid.

40. See Sara R. Farris, “#MeToo Shows Sexism is Not Men of Color’s Prerogative,” *AlJazeera* (February 10, 2018), <https://www.aljazeera.com/opinions/2018/2/10/metoo-shows-sexism-is-not-men-of-colours-prerogative>; Carolyn Cooper, *Sound Clash: Jamaican Dancehall Culture at Large* (London, Palgrave MacMillan: 2004), 245–9.

41. Andrea Ordanini, Joseph C. Nunes and Anastasia Nanni, “The featuring phenomenon in music: how combining artists of different genres increases a song’s popularity,” *Marketing Letters* 29 (2018): 486, emphasis in original.

support the female vocalist's perspective, which is foregrounded in the song. His lines respond to hers, providing evidence for her assertions, but also supporting them through the vocal drumroll ("bidabangbang!") that has become his trademark featuring move.<sup>42</sup>

Sean Paul brings a similar collaborative ethos, and an analogous consciousness of his male privilege, to his performance in "Rockabye." There is evidence of misogyny early in his discography, such as the track "Deport Them" (1998), which deploys an immigration/border control metaphor for judging (and punishing the perceived lack of) women's attractiveness. But evidence from more recent concerts, in which he proclaims his respect for women before launching into "Rockabye," and from interview videos where he salutes female dancehall singers as "soldiers," shows how Sean Paul has come to deliberately align himself with a stance of respect and support for female artists. Chatto reports that he wrote his verse on the spot after hearing the song, describing how "it was really amazing to hear him rapping about that subject; I loved the lyrics he wrote so much."<sup>43</sup> Asked in an interview why he is never accused of selling out, no matter how many features and crossovers he does, Sean Paul cites the song and its theme of single motherhood as an example of his careful crossover and collaboration choices.<sup>44</sup>

Sean Paul's supportive role in the "Rockabye" collaboration is established by his positioning of himself immediately as a supportive linking figure—he introduces "Rockabye" verbally with the line "Clean Bandit, Sean-da-Paul, Anne-Marie sing make them hear," reciting his own name before Anne-Marie's so that he might add an encouraging line for the latter—as well as the musical delivery of his lyrics. While it is not unusual for a male rapper's vocals to be lower in pitch than those of a female singer, Sean Paul's delivery is a sonic modeling of support. When he sings the line "Call it love and devotion, call it a mom's adoration, foundation, a special bond of creation," the lowest note voiced in the whole song is the first syllable of the word "foundation"; the words speak of mother's love as a foundation, while the male voice sonically enacts a masculine foundation in low pitch. As previously indicated, the song's structure is characterized by higher and higher singing pitches and grammatical shifts towards the central character that evoke a movement towards an ambivalent vision of freedom and fulfilment. This ascending theme appears verbally in Sean Paul's encouraging interjections, repeated in several places in the song: "Stay up there" and "Lift up your head, lift it up to the sky,"

42. By far the most in-depth comments on YouTube, and among the most numerous, are those which respond to the themes of work and motherhood in "Rockabye," from people expressing appreciation of their own mothers and/or women articulating solidarity with others experiencing similar situations. Some make specific reference to scenes in the video, with the use of "we" making clear that intended or expected readers of the comment are other women. Often comments are intimately personal, with listeners connecting specific details of the song or video to their own lives and reporting their emotional responses. (See especially comments by Caren Too, Gwapa Koh, Raycheal Ndegwa, Lorraine Mwashita, Fatoumata Njie, Roxii Love, Shyanne Capps, Anahita Manoj, K'Tia Marie, and Nizy Samuel).

43. LeDonne, "Clean Bandit's Grace Chatto talks global smash 'Rockabye,' premiers Autograf Remix: exclusive."

44. Breakfast Club Power 105.1FM. "Sean Paul on eating pum pum, being Jamaican, other artist releasing Caribbean music + new music," *YouTube.com* (November 21, 2016) <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RAXhwLm3d6o>.

notably exhorting the female singer/dancer/protagonist upwards rather than claiming or performing such an ascent himself. The line “stay up there” appears at the moments when Anne-Marie is singing ascending arpeggios at the ends of the lines “Nobody matters like you” and “I’m going to do what I got to do,” the latter of which transitions into the higher-pitched first chorus section. These combinations emphasize the attempt to liberate women’s creative labor through “uplifting” metaphors in language and in ascending pitch from verse to chorus, with Sean Paul participating in each aspect in a supportive yet non-central masculine role.

Beyond the general sense of support he lends to the female protagonist, Sean Paul’s lyrics also invoke the not-so-uplifting aspects of a single mother “going through [the] frustrations” of the daily work to feed and clothe her child. While the main narrative lyrics sung by Anne-Marie remain vague and platitudinous about the “good life” the child will have and the work the mother will do to provide that life, Sean Paul’s part addresses the concrete economic realities of present-day parenting, reassuring the mother-protagonist that she will continue to be able to “find the school fee and the bus fare.” After addressing the absence of the child’s father (“When pops disappear/In a wrong bar can’t find him nowhere”), Sean Paul sing-raps the commiserating couplet “steadily your work flow heavily you know/so you nah stop, nah stop, no time for you dear.” Addressed to the overworked single mother, the lines deftly displace the Taylorist-turned-neoliberal-managerial term “workflow” onto her feminized bodily labor, with “heavy flow” adding a possible menstrual connotation in addition to the sense of verbal flow commonly referenced in rap delivery. This evocation of gendered work resembles 1980s and 1990s dancehall songs by artists such as Bounty Killer and Super Cat, which, as Patricia Saunders argues, draw attention to Jamaican women’s hard work and diminishing economic choices in neoliberalism.<sup>45</sup> Here Sean Paul’s lyrics similarly chart the expansion from South to North of what Nancy Fraser calls a “crisis of care,” in which financialized capitalism destabilizes and makes impossible the reproductive labor on which it also relies.<sup>46</sup> If Sean Paul’s play on “flow” seems to sympathize with the bodily and reproductive work of mothering as well as the relentlessly regular school fees and bus fare, it finally also connects his rapping/toasting flow to the heavy workflow of the single mother.

Sean Paul’s criticism of men’s failure to provide support for women’s affective and reproductive labor is extended in the video. The camera pans between five seated men at separate tables in the bar who are watching Conte pole-dancing. They in turn lip-sync Sean Paul’s vocals chronicling the obstacles the mother faces in providing for her child. This startling sequence adds a subtle racialized dimension to the song’s gender politics, given that conservative and liberal political discourse often animates the figure of the absent black/brown father as an explanation for the poverty of black and brown communities. Voicing recognition of the single mother’s hard work, and criticizing the

45. Patricia Saunders, “Is Not Everything Good to Eat, Good to Talk: Sexual Economy and Dancehall Music in the Global Marketplace” *Small Axe* 13 (2003): 95–115.

46. Nancy Fraser, “Crisis of care? On the social-reproductive contradictions of contemporary capitalism,” *Social Reproduction Theory: Remapping Class, Recentering Oppression*, ed. T. Bhattacharya (London: Pluto Press, 2017). 21–36.

father's absence which compounds these difficulties, Sean Paul acknowledges male culpability for black women's and children's poverty. But by placing his distinctively Patois-inflected rhymes into the mouths of white men "in a wrong bar" watching the sexualized performance of a woman, the video subtly ironizes the racist trope of the absent black father by highlighting white men's involvement in the instantiation and perpetuation of this nexus of gendered, racialized oppression. Sean Paul's lines are then resynchronized with his image in the pub, before the last line of the rap ("you find the school fee and the bus fare") is mouthed by the white male bartender. This surprising visual effect redirects attention from poor people's fraught spending priorities (the lyrics of the song contrast the absent father selfishly buying beer with the mother scraping together money for the child's necessities) to the question of who profits. This moment in the video not only implicates the white spectator characters within the world of the narrative, but the audience of the video too, as the white men turn from the spectacle of the sexualized dance performance to look at the camera as they recite Sean Paul's words to viewers who are also implicated in this gendered visual economy.

If both Sean Paul's lyrics and his curious ventriloquized consciousness-raising of the white male pubgoers seems at least provocative, if not outright feminist, a question remains about the extent to which his call for men to better support women relies on women continuing to perform and define themselves through reproductive roles. Carolyn Cooper argues that dancehall performances enact "female fertility rituals" in which men demonstrate "valorization of the female as nurturer—both maternal and erotic."<sup>47</sup> In a more critical tone, Saunders has pointed out the exhaustive policing of sexuality in dancehall culture, connecting the extreme censure and discouragement of nonreproductive sex and the emphasis on men "doing the work" of vaginal penetration to cultural-nationalist economic anxieties about the reproduction of life in Jamaica.<sup>48</sup> Shabba Ranks' 1990 track "Dem Bow," whose beat has come to dominate the genre of reggaeton, echoes this connection, valorizing strictly reproductive sexuality and equating oral sex and homosexuality with "bowing" to the imperialist oppressor.<sup>49</sup> These condemnations of non-reproductive sex continue even, as Nadia Ellis has observed, when they thinly mask the open secret of queer participation in dancehall performance in prominent venues and music videos.<sup>50</sup>

If we can see some continuity with dancehall traditions of maternal veneration in "Rockabye," Sean Paul's orientation toward female sexualized performance also seems different in his awareness, as well as that of the white pubgoers he ventriloquizes, that he is watching women's *work* rather than naturalized "fertility rituals." Sean Paul seems to understand women as workers rather than as natural nurturers: in a 2020 video

47. Cooper, *Sound Clash*, 105.

48. Saunders, "Is Not Everything Good to Eat."

49. Wayne Marshall, "Dem Bow, Dembow, Dem Bo: Translation and Transnation in Reggaeton," *Lied und Populäre Kultur* 53 (2008) 135–8, and Reshma B. "Dancehall's oral sex debate." *Complex* (August 22, 2017) [www.complex.com/pigeons-and-planes/2017/08/dancehall-oral-sex-debate](http://www.complex.com/pigeons-and-planes/2017/08/dancehall-oral-sex-debate).

50. Nadia Ellis, "Out and bad: Toward a queer performance hermeneutic in Jamaican Dancehall," *Small Axe* 15/2 (2011): 7–23.



discussing his dancehall influences, he begins with Sister Nancy, highlighting her feminist rewritings on her classic song “Bam Bam,” but, more surprisingly perhaps, also touting the brilliance of newcomer Koffee, calling her a “soldier” and saluting her.<sup>51</sup> Sean Paul’s description of dancehall in the 2020 video as a version of reggae with a “militarized” beat is surprising in its emphasis on militancy rather than reproductive sex as a mode of cultural nationalist resistance. In this, Sean Paul evokes Michael Denning’s sense of the martial decolonial character of global popular music from its beginnings, but also suggests that he might be able to imagine female artists like Koffee as fellow resistance fighters rather than fertility goddesses.<sup>52</sup>

Thus Sean Paul’s featuring on “Rockabye” offers a representation of supportive masculinity, modeling it in sound, image, lyrics and performance. By listening to and foregrounding Anne-Marie’s vocals over his own, Sean Paul performs as well as describes male support for women’s labor. His performance avoids “mansplaining”—the phenomenon of men patronizingly explaining to women situations about which they are well aware—and instead takes responsibility for men’s role in maintaining the status quo, emphasizing the importance of men talking to other men about their complicities with patriarchal power and imagining how to actively challenge gendered inequalities.

## CONCLUSION

Our analysis of “Rockabye” has illuminated a few somewhat contradictory points: the oppressive racial and gender dynamics of the current global pop music production system; how pop songs like “Rockabye,” despite their reliance on that system, are able to illuminate its injustices in a way that foregrounds feminized sexual and reproductive labor as labor; and how Sean Paul has combined the musical properties and themes of gender and labor in Jamaican dancehall music with a feminist realist sensibility in his adoption of a supportive featuring role. Sean Paul’s representation of male recognition of women’s sexual and care work in “Rockabye” provides an opportunity for its fans to talk about gender, race, and labor in a way that foregrounds the gendered distribution of economic power and freedom. Yet despite the possibilities for critique and solidarity opened up by Sean Paul’s performance in “Rockabye,” feminist realism pervades the song and its video: there is no sense in these texts that the “daily struggle” of service workers might end or even be better compensated, that the school fees and bus fare might be abolished, that “a good life” might be attainable for the pole-dancer mother as anything more than a moment of introspective pleasure.

Although the song seems to clearly embody the melancholic orientation of feminist realism, we also read it, particularly its enactments of solidarity, as a precursor to the Tambourine Army uprising, a movement begun in January 2017 by rural Jamaican women in response to a pastor’s sexual abuse of a 15-year-old girl. Fourteen women

51. Pitchfork. “Sean Paul breaks down his top dancehall songs: Under the influence,” *YouTube* (March 17, 2020) [www.youtube.com/watch?v=rh5ARIHFo-8](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rh5ARIHFo-8)

52. Michael Denning, *Noise Uprising: The Audiopolitics of a World Musical Revolution* (London: Verso, 2015).

entered the pastor's church to protest the abuse, and an argument ensued that culminated in one of the protestors hitting another pastor on the head with a tambourine.<sup>53</sup> The Tambourine Army, which described itself as "a radical social justice movement committed to uprooting the scourge of sexual violence & safeguarding the rights of women & girls," quickly expanded.<sup>54</sup> Women and men held nationwide marches, including a "Rasta drum-and-pan-driven procession moving at a nimble pace through the streets of Kingston," during which dancer Neila Ebanks, accompanied by her troupe wearing "armor-like outfits," "danced a powerful 'cutting and clearing' dance," indicating that "cutting and clearing space for themselves was what this march was about for the women and men who participated in it."<sup>55</sup> The momentum of the Tambourine Army was curtailed after the Jamaican government arrested co-founder Latoya Nugent and charged her with cybercrimes for posting the names of accused sexual predators on social media, but its 2017 moment appears to have been one of insurgent consciousness-raising and collective militancy.

If the Tambourine Uprising was short-lived, its ethos seems to have been channeled into an explosion of feminist dancehall energy. From Jada Kingdom's "Love Situations" (2017), whose video finds the protagonist casually dismembering her unfaithful boyfriend; to Ishawna's "Equal Rights" (2017), which dares to make the fraught demand for cunnilingus; to the video for Shenseea's "Blessed" (2019), in which the singer cuddles in bed with another woman, female artists suddenly seem to be openly contesting the gender and sexual norms of dancehall.<sup>56</sup> The newest dancehall sensation, young "soldier" Koffee who won a Grammy in 2019 for her album *Rapture*, is challenging dancehall's sexual norms in a different way, through her androgynous and sexually ambiguous presentation. While a few critics and dancehall artists have attempted to identify and malign her alleged lesbianism (gleaned from her gender-neutral lyrics and covers of male-authored songs), the majority of Jamaican fans and critics seem to defend her music and sexuality from critical voices, asking, "Should it even matter who she is asking how they like their 'koffee'?"<sup>57</sup> These artists' new work, and the changing fan responses to that work, suggests that global musical circuits, despite their oppressive labor practices, might still facilitate activist possibilities. Of course it remains to be seen whether this new wave of media feminism can grow and change, whether it can move beyond the consoling interchanges between Anne-Marie and Conte in the "Rockabye" video, and between fans in YouTube comments, to imagine and support the mass multigenerational uprisings of the Tambourine Army, Koffee's androgynous soldiering, and the militant possibilities for "cutting and clearing" they suggest. ■

53. Kate Chappell, "Tambourine Army hits back against sexual violence in Jamaica," *The Guardian Online* (March 10, 2017), <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/mar/10/jamaica-caribbean-tambourine-army-sexual-violence>

54. Tambourine Army Facebook page, 2017.

55. Annie Paul, "Nah Mek Dem Win." Rise Of The Tambourine Army," *The Gleaner* (March 14, 2017), <http://jamaica-gleaner.com/article/commentary/20170315/annie-paul-nah-mek-dem-win-rise-tambourine-army/>

56. Summer Eldemire, "Jamaica's Brave LGBTQ+ Scene is Nudging Dancehall in a New Direction," in *The Face* (August 13, 2019), <https://theface.com/music/jamaica-pride-dancehall-lgbtq-shenseea>

57. K.D. Anglin, "Koffee's Sexuality Scrutinized, Dancehall Fans Divided Over 'Lockdown' Video," in *Urban Islandz*, (July 20, 2020), <https://urbanislandz.com/2020/07/20/koffee-sexualityscrutinized-dancehall-fans-divided-lockdown-video/>

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