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In the decimated city: SYMPTOM, TRANSLATION, AND THE PERFORMANCE OF A NEW YORK *JÍBARO* FROM LADÍ TO LUCIANO TO LAVOE

URAYOÁN NOEL

ABSTRACT

In this article I examine El Conjunto Típico Ladí's *seis con décima* "Un jíbaro en Nueva York" (1947) as an exercise in performative (mis)translation. Following Patricia Gherovici's *The Puerto Rican Syndrome* and Frances Negrón-Muntaner's *Boricua Pop*, I argue that the song's performance of a *jíbaro* in New York builds upon what was already a contested and controversial construction—the Puerto Rican *jíbaro*—and posits a multilayered, synthetic, fluid, and highly ambivalent model of diasporic *puertorriqueñidad*. (In my reading, mistranslation functions not as an obstacle to diaspora's articulation, but as a key strategy of diasporic performance.) Lastly, I read this song against the Nuyorican movement's aesthetic and political resignifying of the *jíbaro*, as evidenced in Felipe Luciano's spoken-word piece "Jíbaro/My Pretty Nigger" and Héctor Lavoe and Willie Colón's *Asalto navideño* albums. [Key words: jíbaro, music, diaspora, translation, psychoanalysis, performance]



Ladislao Ladi (center) with his group *El Maestro Ladi y Conjunto de Cuerdas*. From the album *El cuatro puertorriqueño* (instrumento nacional). *La Casa del Cuatro Puertorriqueño*.

The jíbaro, the native peasant of Puerto Rico’s mountainous inland, is a founding trope of modern Puerto Rican identity. It has been used to signify numerous supposed traits of the Puerto Rican national character, from hospitality and humility to laziness and opportunism. From Manuel Alonso’s *costumbrista* vignettes in *El Gíbaro* (1849) to the appropriation of the jíbaro’s straw hat, the *pava*, as a symbol of the commonwealth, the discourses of *jibarisimo* and *puertorriqueñidad* have been inexorably, and often dubiously, linked.

Facing the modernization and political turmoil of the late 19th and 20th centuries, Puerto Rican intellectuals sometimes engaged in a spirited and polemical game of “Will the real jíbaros please stand up!” In his “La actualidad del jíbaro” Antonio S. Pedreira meditated on “el jíbaro auténtico” and sought to distinguish the “jíbaro histórico” from the “jíbaro moderno” (Pedreira 1968: 21). In this context, the survival of the jíbaro becomes, like that of the American bald eagle, a political imperative and a test of the national imagination. But what happens when the jíbaro moves to New

York? Is he a portable good, attuned to the migratory *vaivén* of a Puerto Rican nation “on the move” (Duany 2002: 2)? Or is he, like the iconic *coquí*, a fragile and fixed signifier, inseparable from the island of origin?

Here I will examine El Conjunto Típico Ladí’s *seis con décima* “Un jíbaro en Nueva York” (1947) as an exercise in performative mistranslation. Following Patricia Gherovici’s *The Puerto Rican Syndrome* (2003) and Frances Negrón-Muntaner’s *Boricua Pop* (2004), I will argue that the song’s performative construction of a “jíbaro in New York” builds upon what was already a contested and controversial construction, the Puerto Rican jíbaro, and posits a multi-layered, synthetic, fluid, and highly ambivalent model of diasporic puertorriqueñidad. Furthermore, I will suggest how “mistranslation” can be construed not as an obstacle to the articulation of diaspora, but rather, and as Brent Hayes Edwards (2003) argues, as the sort of performative gesture upon which diaspora is founded. Lastly, I will consider why the model provided by “Un jíbaro en Nueva York” is still relevant today and how it can be read in the context of the Nuyorican aesthetics of the 1960s and 1970s.

Jibarismo and/as performance

In “The Jíbaro Masquerade and the Subaltern Politics of Creole Identity Formation in Puerto Rico, 1745–1823,” historian Francisco A. Scarano writes:

The trope in question [the jíbaro] initially surfaced in a series of texts from the Spanish-American independence period in which writers disguised their oppositional politics behind a discursive mask, passing themselves off as native peasants, called *jibaros* by contemporary island residents. Although these writers came from a privileged group, at their inaugural moment as a class they were disposed to seize on plebeian customs, to uncover the subtle political meanings encrypted in them, to speak in a disguised and difficult peasant vernacular, and, most important, to identify their own politics vis-à-vis absolutists and other reactionaries with the maneuvers and strategies of everyday forms of popular resistance (1996: 1400).

Scarano goes on to characterize the trope of the jíbaro as “*ambiguously* inclusive of the racially mixed peasant majority” (1996: 1402—emphasis in the original). I wish to stress this ambiguous quality of the trope of jibarismo, inasmuch as it foregrounds its “placeholder” quality; that is, the way in which the jíbaro can be understood as an empty or floating signifier, one that is up for grabs, affectively loaded yet neutral in value, and can thus be deployed to summon emotional and political connections, to forge imaginative communities, and to serve particular interests in a particular context. Instead of a true and foundational jíbaro who was later sullied and commodified, Scarano reveals the jíbaro as always and already synthetic, and bound up in complex issues of race, class, and colonial politics.

An analogous gesture of strategic appropriation can be seen in the Puerto Rican musicians who migrated to New York City in the first half of the 20th century. In her “Paradoxical Ethnicities: Puerto Rican Musicians in Post World War I New York City,” Ruth Glasser paraphrases the Puerto Rican singer Bobby Capó’s comments that the singer was not merely an artist but also a worker “who is as

eclectic as he or she needs to be about finding jobs” (1990: 67). Glasser adds that, at times, “this meant conforming to the clichéd images of entertainment industry personnel or non-Hispanic audiences, who indeed saw all Latin Americans as interchangeable” (1990: 67). Already working within the rigid confines of “Latin-ness,” all the New York City Latin bands of the era were expected to play such crossover hits as “El Manisero” (“The Peanut Vendor”), regardless of their own musical styles or inclinations (Glasser 1990: 69). According to Glasser, the composer Rafael Hernández’s Trio Borinquen spent several years recording as “Trio Quisqueya” to create a series of songs for Dominican audiences (1990: 70).

This early performance of New York City *Latinidad* can be understood as a pragmatic identity tradeoff: Puerto Ricans can maintain a degree of musical and cultural autonomy, but to survive as musicians they must at least minimally perform a market-friendly pan-“Latin-ness.”¹ At this stage, the idea of a “jíbaro en Nueva York” is not marketable: the Puerto Rican musician in New York cannot rely on his fellow Puerto Ricans as his only audience; he must appeal to the (white and Latino) Other, and jibarismo has no crossover appeal. Could the performance of a New York City jibarismo in El Conjunto Típico Ladí’s song be understood as a symptom of (and a reaction against) “crossover” anxiety?

An interesting parallelism to this anxiety can be found in Frances Negrón-Muntaner’s analysis of Jean-Michel Basquiat. Negrón-Muntaner writes:

While Basquiat envisioned commodification as a way out of the racialized body to the extent that it socially valorized him, the requirements of steady output undermined his independence and relationship to painting, making the artist fatally aware of his shameful status as a racialized subject, even under privileged conditions [...] [He] began to increasingly see himself as a “laborer” who also had to perform for white patrons in order to succeed (2004: 119–20).

Following through on Negrón-Muntaner’s reading of Basquiat, we can understand a song like “Un jíbaro en Nueva York” both as a reaction against enforced pan-“Latin-ness” (in its affirming of traditional and unmarketable Puerto Rican jíbaro music) and, more controversially, as an exercise in identity translation—from Spanish to English, from mountain hick to urban slick—which gives way to a symptom, an *ataque* (more on this later). Lastly, we can interpret the song as a “failed” attempt at musical and cultural crossover, now that the earlier, Cuban-derived styles (such as *son* and *rumba*) had become been effectively assimilated.

“Un jíbaro en Nueva York”

Cuatro player, songwriter, and bandleader Ladí (born Ladislao Martínez) is widely considered to be the greatest exponent of Puerto Rican jíbaro music (Rivera 2006). He performed for Theodore Roosevelt and Cardinal Spellman and played his jíbaro music in Carnegie Hall (Rivera 2006). Formed in New York City in the 1940s, his Conjunto Típico Ladí featured the vocalist “Chuito el de Bayamón” (born Jesús Sánchez). Chuito was the first jíbaro singer to perform on the radio in Puerto Rico (Rivera 2006; Marks 1989).

In “Un jíbaro en Nueva York,” Chuito is accompanied by Ernestina (born Ernestina Reyes, aka “La Calandria”), the leading female performer of jíbaro music. The song is a

seis con décima: that is, it is in the traditional inland Puerto Rican style known as the *seis*, which has Andalusian roots and uses instrumentation similar to that of *cuartetos* but adds a *güiro* (gourd rasp) for rhythm; it is called a seis con décima, because the vocalists recite (or often improvise) *décimas*, ten-line octosyllabic stanzas of Spanish origin that rhyme ABBAACCDDC. More specifically, “Un jíbaro en Nueva York” is a *controversia*, a type of seis con décima where two people take turns improvising *décimas*, most often as a sort of battle of wits, and in a festive, mocking tone.

The song is structured as a dare, as Ernestina questions Chuito’s language prowess and challenges him to name “cómo le dicen a todo en los Estados Unidos.”² This goes on for six stanzas, three apiece, each time Ernestina challenges and Chuito answers in “a___le dicen___” format. While it would be easy to dismiss the song as a formal or genre exercise, or as mere fun and games, there are various productively “controversial” aspects to this debate which should not be overlooked. First among them is the fact that it is structured as a translation. In effect, the song summons, enacts, and transforms the shame that the jíbaro feels adjusting to a(n) (old) new city and performing, mangling, and bungling a(n) (old) new tongue. If, as Negrón-Muntaner suggests, the constituting of being Puerto Rican as a shameful identification in the United States is founded partly on “the persistent claim that *boricuas* as a people had nothing to contribute to America” (2004: 21), then this song can be construed as an early attempt to find a voice and claim a space.

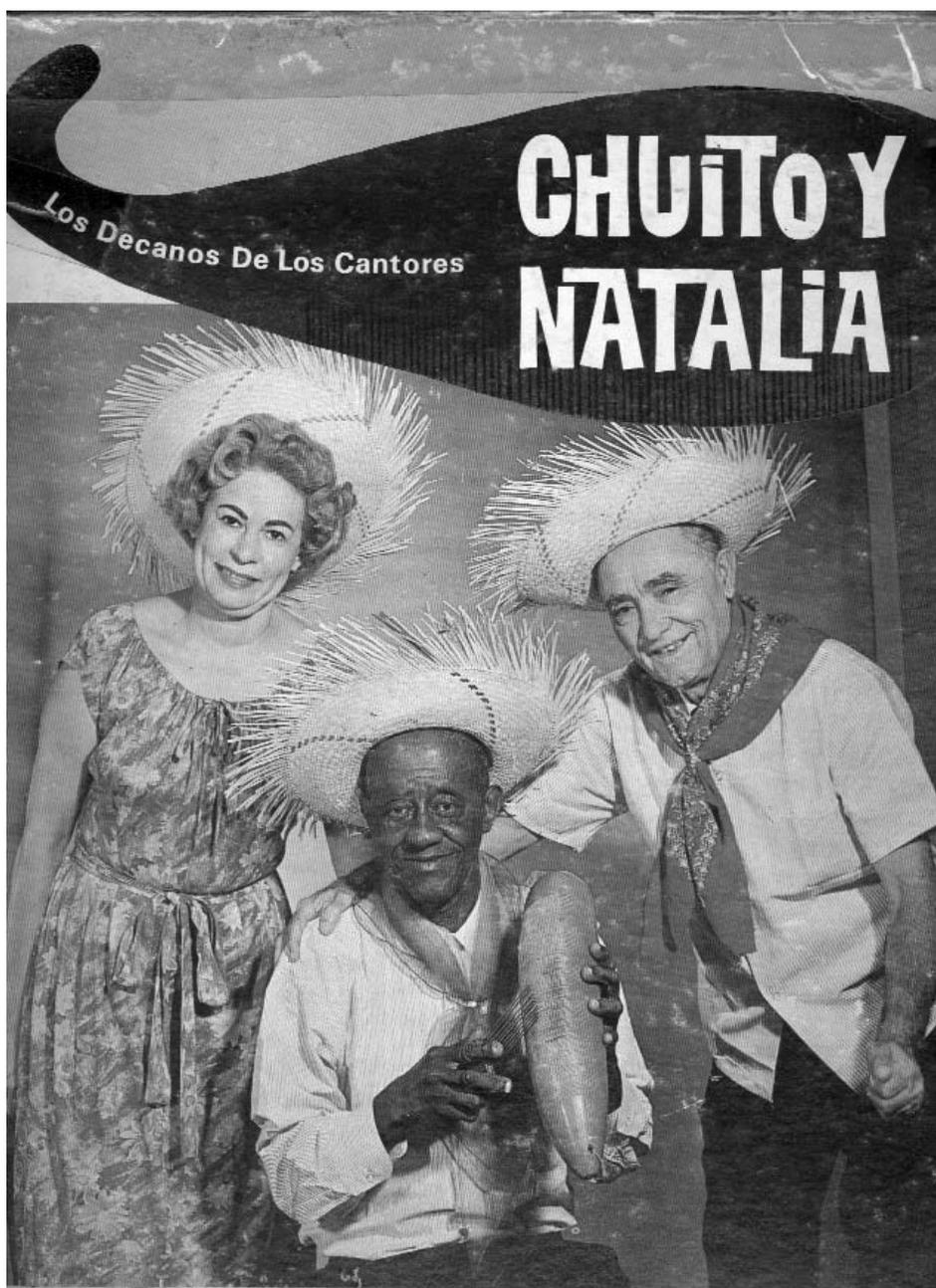
The performance works both ways. Negrón-Muntaner quotes Pedreira’s insistence that the jíbaro, like the elite, had to protect himself from working class encroachment from the urban zones and competition by blacks on the coast (2004: 16). But the New York jíbaro as Chuito performs him is defiantly unguarded (proud of his shame?), urban, underclass, and implicitly racialized, yet relishing the appropriation and mispronunciation of English words. The gleeful way Chuito forces the “y” in the word “year” sounds like a caricature of a Puerto Rican trying to pronounce English; that is, like a caricature of himself. By hyperperforming his English, Chuito immunizes himself against the legislating gaze of the Master; to recycle a postcolonial riff, his body is always already deconstructed, one (mis)step ahead of the game. This sense of hyperperformance is heightened by the breakneck speed of the song, which lends an almost dadaist air of violent exuberance to Chuito’s laugh-tracked spew.

Though the effect is undoubtedly humorous, the song is more than just a series of in-jokes for the amusement of fellow Puerto Ricans, since the issue of translation is never adequately resolved. This becomes clear when Chuito sings “Al beso le dicen kis” and a male voice in the background (clearly not Ernestina’s) shouts out “¿Cómo?!” Thus, even the backing musicians, his fellow jíbaros, cannot quite follow Chuito’s exercise in performative translation. It is possible to trace in this gesture an inverted colonial discourse, in the Gherovician sense: while Gherovici, in *The Puerto Rican Syndrome*, is writing about a specific historical situation (the unexplained “syndrome” that afflicted Puerto Rican soldiers in the U.S. Army during the 1950s), her insights into the performance of the *ataque* (the nervous attack that characterizes the syndrome) shed light on the ways in which diasporic Puerto Rican identity is coded and performed.

For Gherovici, the Puerto Rican soldiers’ performance of the *ataque* for their American doctors is a creative reaction to an untenable colonial situation. Similarly, Chuito’s unresolved, quirky, and chaotic act of translation can be understood as an instance of the Puerto Rican *ataque* wherein “[the] return of the violence seems the

only possible defense: the ataque is the way a hysteric can send back to the Master his message in an inverted form” (Gherovici 2003: 139).

While this inversion can be read productively in the light of postcolonial interventions such as Homi Bhabha’s “mimicry,” I propose we not do so, for it would be too easy to subsume under the postcolonial banner; and besides, the slippage from an ambivalently colonial gesture to a postcolonial one needs to be more carefully considered, especially as befits the ambivalent Puerto Rican situation. Bhabha argues that the “success of colonial appropriation depends on a proliferation of



Chuito (right) with jíbaro singer Natalia and the master of the güiro Toribio (center). From the album Chuito y Natalia (los decanos de los cantores): Con Toribio y El Conjunto de Industrias Nativas. Ansonia Records (ALP 1393, Vol. 6).

inappropriate objects that ensure its strategic failure, so that mimicry is at once resemblance and menace” (1994: 86), but the menace in “Un jíbaro en Nueva York,” while there, is much harder to trace, and the gesture seems less angry, less self-conscious and self-aware (though just as ironic, ambivalent, and loaded) as the “liberating” postcolonial gesture.

Of course, in Gherovici’s polysemic formulation, the *ataque* implies agency (as in the nationalist attacks against the U.S.), but also a disavowal of agency (as in “I don’t know what came over me, it must have been an *ataque*.”). Gherovici relates the *ataque* to an “indecision about what language to use” (2003: 140). Chuito’s bold translation is closer to this colonial or even precolonial indecision than to the more self-consciously hybrid and reappropriative postcolonial gestures of later New York Puerto Rican cultural productions such as Fania salsa and Nuyorican poetry.³ Nonetheless, as we will see later, he is an influence on these cultural productions, which will find ways of translating him, Ernestina, Ladí, and the New York jíbaro into new aesthetic and political imaginaries.

Gherovici analyzes the numerous name changes that Puerto Rico has gone through (Borinquen, San Juan Bautista, Porto Rico) and insists that “Puerto Rican referential ambiguity is symptomatic of a long history of colonialism” (2003: 141). “Un jíbaro en Nueva York” is not free of this sort of referential ambiguity, especially if we ask, Which jíbaro is that? and To whom/for whom/from where is this jibarismo being performed?

In the liner notes to *The Music of Puerto Rico 1929–1947* (the import collector’s CD where “Un jíbaro en Nueva York” appears) the song is credited to Ladislao Martínez (aka Ladí) and Jesús Sanchez (aka Jesús Sánchez Erazo, aka Chuito el de Bayamón) but the vocals are credited to Jesús Rodríguez Erazo (presumably an oversight) and Ernestina Reyes (aka Ernestina, aka La Calandria). On the other hand, the name of the band is Conjunto Típico Ladí. While this sort of division of labor and the use of nicknames were both standard practices among the *conjuntos* of the time, the referential ambiguity complicates our interpretation, since we cannot ascribe the song to an auteur. Although controversies were structured as improvisations, it is unclear here whether the lyrics are improvised (the tempo of the song and the singers’ lack of hesitation suggests that at least portions of the lyrics may not have been improvised). It may even be the case that somebody else wrote the lyrics.

In any case, such confusion complicates the idea of New York Puerto Rican music as an unproblematic site for the performing or construction or invoking of imagined communities, since the idea of an imagination in the politically expedient, post-Enlightenment sense is hard to graft on to a text as synthetic and as *porously diasporic* as this. Since, as Pedreira suggests, the trope of the jíbaro was in crisis in the rapidly industrializing and politically conflicted Puerto Rico of the early to mid-twentieth century, and since jíbaro music in New York still lacked cultural cachet and marketability, the question of from where and to what effect this jibarismo was deployed is a hard one to answer sociologically. Perhaps more ethnographic work will give us a clearer picture as to how the cultural value of the jíbaro was fixed and negotiated in mid-century New York City. For now, though, Gherovici allows us to interpret “Un jíbaro en Nueva York” as a foundational symptom inasmuch as she shows “how the Symbolic precedes the imaginary aspect of representation; the aggressiveness of the image has been subordinated to the Symbolic itself in the process by which *the Puerto Rican proper name emerged, and signed itself, as its were, through its syndrome*” (2003: 143—emphasis added).

Mistranslating diaspora

In his *The Practice of Diaspora: Literature, Translation, and the Rise of Black Internationalism*, Brent Hayes Edwards considers the articulation of diaspora as predicated on its own *décalage*, a term which he resignifies to convey the “unevenness” that marks that of diaspora which is untransferable and can never, it seems, be fully, faithfully translated (2003: 14). For Edwards, the articulation of diaspora is never a smooth, unproblematic affair, since “*décalage* is proper to the structure of a diasporic ‘racial’ formation, and its return in the form of *disarticulation*—the points of misunderstanding, bad faith, unhappy translation—must be considered a necessary haunting” (2003: 14).

Edwards’s redeployment of diaspora in terms of creative practice allows us to consider the mistranslations of “Un jíbaro en Nueva York” not as missteps on the road to diaspora’s full articulation but as paradigmatic of a New York Puerto Rican diaspora performance which conceives of the Puerto Rican’s life in New York City as founded on disarticulation, and, perhaps, as haunted by unhappy attempts at translation. The sort of bilingual play I am interested in is of course not unique to “Un jíbaro en Nueva York”—it is in fact characteristic of the music of Puerto Ricans in New York, from *plenas* like “El home relief” (1935) by Canario y su grupo to the Latin boogaloes of the 1960s. What is distinctive and even *sui generis* about “Un jíbaro en Nueva York” is its sustained and systematic equating of diasporic identity with performative mistranslation; more than any other *seis con décima* or *controversia* I am familiar with. Chuito, Ernestina, and Ladí’s song operates at the limits of language, communicating the seemingly incommunicable movement (across and along the English-Spanish divide) of a diaspora community. Chuito and Ernestina’s translation exercise reveals the articulation of diaspora as always already bound by a “two-ness” (articulation/disarticulation, English/Spanish) equivalent to what Edwards calls the “strange ‘two-ness’ of the joint” (2003: 15).

It is significant that among the seemingly random list of seemingly harmless words that Chuito “good-naturedly” translates, we find “*miedo*” (“fear,” which he suggestively “mistranslates” as “*la fría*”) and “*ratero*” (“pickpocket”).⁴ Thus, what would seem to be a harmless translation becomes politicized, as the relation to the Other is mediated or even short circuited through “humorous” and “unintended” self-pathologizing (the New York jíbaro as a fear-inducing and/or fear-driven petty criminal).

Perhaps the most poignant and frightening moment is when Chuito translates “¿Qué te pasa?” (What’s the matter with you) as—and I transcribe phonetically—“*Guasimara uit chú?*” The violent way he stresses the “*chú*” is in contrast with the more subdued delivery of “¿Qué te pasa?” Of course, this can be explained as a reaction to the metric requirements of the *décima*: Chuito needs to stress that last syllable to preserve the end-rhyme with “*balijú*” in line seven. Still, the pathological implications of the phrase are clear. These implications become unavoidable if we read “*chú*” not only as the Spanish speaker’s way of contracting the “*th*” in “with” with the “*y*” in “you,” but also as a alluding to “*Chu*” or Chuito himself! Read this way (*what’s the matter with Chu!*) the song is recast as a self-diagnosis, a bold and brilliant performance of another inaugural Puerto Rican syndrome: self-as-other taken to its most disturbing and powerful extremes. This New York jíbaro teeters between self-pity and self-affirmation, between the self-empowering mimicry of the postcolonial, and the psychoanalytic tear at the heart of the ambivalently and unavoidably colonial (are they the same?).

The New York Puerto Rican appears here not as an empowered “Both...And” (for that would be too much like the Puerto Rican Commonwealth’s fantasies of

“the best of both worlds”) but rather as a founding and confounding “Neither...Nor.” If, as Juan Flores argues, the “sociocultural location of Caribbean Latinos is [...] defined by their relationship to non-Caribbean Latinos on the one hand and to non-Latino Caribbeans on the other” (2002: 71), then “Un jíbaro en Nueva York” performs “self-definition” as nonrelational and suspended.

Appropriately, the song ends with Chuito signing off, wishing us a good night: “Vengan ‘aploses, mai fren/ Meni zenk yú, veri sún,” a distortion of English syntax through literal translation from the Spanish—presumably from “Muchas gracias, hasta pronto” instead of the idiomatic “Many thanks, see you soon.” For a final, brief instant, Chuito stops being a translator and at last performs the Master’s performance: he occupies the English speaker’s discursive space, only to have his words drown out in the last joyous strains of the music.

We must not overlook the role of Ernestina/La Calandria in this performance. Her dry, deadpan delivery contrasts with the needy, clowning histrionics of Chuito (she is, pointedly, the “straight man” of this comedic duo). Her vocal style points to the roots of the seis in southern Spain (Marks 1989) and adds yet another layer of cultural referentiality to the song. Her forceful delivery highlights the dominance/



La Calandria at a musical review, Teatro Puerto Rico (Bronx, NY), October 18, 1956. Photographer Carlton Photo Shop. The Justo Martí Photographic Collection. Archives of the Puerto Rican Diaspora. Centro de Estudios Puertorriqueños, Hunter College, CUNY. Reprinted, by permission, from Centro de Estudios Puertorriqueños.

submission dynamic at work in the song, as what initially seemed like a dare turns out to be a series of orders: “Yo no trago bromas” and “Tienes que hablar inglés” and, most noticeably, “Arrodíllate a mis pies / Sin alardes y sin ruidos.” Chuito dutifully placates her by spewing his catalog of English words.

The richness of the vocabulary Ernestina uses (words such as “analogía” and “hilvanar”) reveals by contrast how poignant and pathetic Chuito’s role is, since he is limited to parroting the words in strict “a = b” equivalences. Here, the woman is the owner of metaphors, as in Ernestina’s shocking proclamation that she is “como aquel guerrero fuerte / que dijo al pie de la muerte / muero, pero no me rindo.” The woman is both the other and the Other: both self-as-other (because she speaks the words that Chuito cannot speak) and the Father or Master, the legislator of language whose demands must be met. It is she who cheers him on and goads him so that he can complete his translation: “Between the name and what is named there is always a gap. Thus, for Lacan, naming ultimately sends us to the metaphor of the Name-of-the-Father, while embodying the irreversible division of the speaking subject as an effect of the signifier” (Gherovici 2003: 142).

These jíbaros in New York are halfway between Puerto Rican migrants and New York Puerto Rican underclass, caught between the “docile” (queer?) Puerto Ricans they left behind (Negrón-Muntaner 2004: 16) and the Nuyorican diasporic citizens that will follow them. Ladí, Chuito, Ernestina & Co. inhabit a syndrome and perform a symptom of mid-century New York Puerto Rican identity formation. Furthermore, and beyond the playful pathologizing of Gherovici’s book—there is, it must be noted, a decided tone of condescension in the Argentine Gherovici’s account of poor Puerto Ricans performing their colonial symptom—there is also a positive political valence to the quirky mistranslations of “Un jíbaro en Nueva York”: in stressing the incommunicable aspect of the Puerto Rican diaspora experience, these musicians underscore the materiality and specificity of diaspora.

For Ladí, Chuito, and Ernestina, the articulation of diaspora requires a commitment to something like what Kwame Anthony Appiah (1993) calls “thick translation”: a translation that is culturally specific and attuned to transcultural dynamics; one that accounts for the lived experiences that prop up language; one that rejects the flat, generic tone and questions the simultaneously reductionist and universalist assumptions of conventional translation. To make sense of “Un jíbaro en Nueva York” one must, in a sense, “become” a “jíbaro en Nueva York” and work through the competing demands of English and Spanish; to become so is to allow oneself to be constituted by the difficulties of an impossible or implausible translation.

The decimated city: Nuyorican Jibarismo

Ángel Rama, in his by now canonical *La ciudad letrada* (1984), writes of modern Latin American intellectuals’ attempts to create and sustain a “lettered city,” which sometimes complemented and sometimes countered the thriving, increasingly chaotic metropolises of the late 19th and early 20th centuries. The construction of this “lettered city” can be seen as a way to protect the elite status both of the writers themselves (many of whom came from privileged racial and class backgrounds) and of their writings, as new political structures and the rise of popular culture threatened literature’s privileged position.

Because the music of Puerto Ricans in mid-century New York City knew no such privilege, and because a style such as the seis con décima functions at the intersection of literature (the décima) and music (the seis), I want to propose that “Un jíbaro en Nueva York” recasts Rama’s “lettered city” into the “decimated city”

of diaspora. It is not that the *décima* itself is anti-intellectual (key innovators in modern Latin American poetry, from Luis Lloréns Torres to Julio Herrera y Reissig, wrote *décimas* with serious literary ambition), but that the meaning and import of these *décimas* can only be understood *in and as performance*: the lettered city of the modern intellectual gives way to the sung, recited, or “decimated” city that Chuito and Ernestina inhabit. Again, my point here is not that the articulation of the Puerto Rican diaspora must be fundamentally “un-intellectual” but that making sense of diasporic articulation requires engaging with hybrid, unconventional, non-page-bound, and performance-oriented interventions such as “Un jíbaro en Nueva York.”

Of course there is a more literal and disturbing sense to “decimated”: eliminated, annihilated, extinguished, eradicated. The threat of decimation can be construed, like the experience of dispersal, as constitutive of diaspora, and, in the context of a rapidly industrializing Puerto Rico, it could be argued that the jíbaro was already an “endangered species” by the time “Un jíbaro en Nueva York” was recorded in the late 1940s. Thus, as the denizens of a “decimated” city, Chuito and Ernestina engage in a performative articulation of diaspora bounded, paradoxically, by the threat of its very decimation.

This conception of diaspora as performative articulation in the context of the threat of decimation will be crucial to the Nuyorican aesthetics that will emerge in the 1960s and 1970s. For instance, in Miguel Algarín’s seminal 1970s poem “A Mongo Affair,” the Nuyorican experience is defined in part by its constraints, granted a certain brand of exceptionalism: “I am the minority everywhere / I am among the few in all societies / I belong to a tribe of nomads / that roam the world without / a place to call a home” (Algarín 1975: 55).

“Jíbaro / My Pretty Nigger”

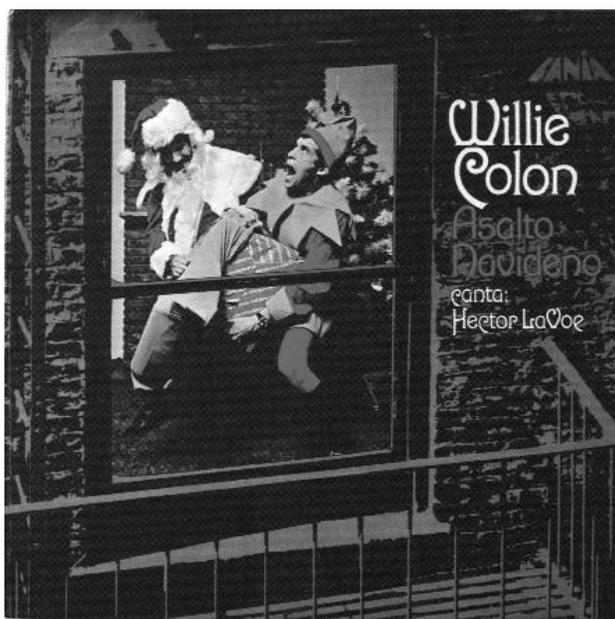
Perhaps nowhere are the complexities of Nuyorican jibarismo as forcefully and imaginatively articulated as in Felipe Luciano’s spoken-word poem, “Jíbaro / My Pretty Nigger” (1972), featured on Eddie Palmieri’s *Live at Sing Sing* record, and a clear forerunner of the slam and spoken-word aesthetics of today. Goaded by the cheers and applause of the Sing Sing prisoners, Luciano recites visions of the sugarcane fields of Puerto Rico, the slave trade, the city subways, and “black spirits,” elevating the jíbaro to the level of the mythic and world historical, and inviting him/them/us to “forget about self.”

Very much of its time, “Jíbaro / My Pretty Nigger” embodies what might be seen as a diaspora nationalism where Blacks and Puerto Ricans are all “a people” and where it is the artist-activist’s duty to help build a nation for “all our people” (Luciano’s phrase). For Luciano, the jíbaro is not the “hick” but the “ancestor,” and “nigger” here is a term both of endearment and of mutual identification; his poem/piece brings together the “jíbaro” and the “nigger” as mirror instances of an underclass, racialized other. In essence, Luciano’s “browning” of the jíbaro makes sense of Puerto Rico’s history while inserting the New York Puerto Rican into a larger Afro-diasporic imaginary, thus providing new models for affective and political relation.

While “Jíbaro / My Pretty Nigger” can be interpreted as a radical diasporic refashioning of the trope of the jíbaro, in a way it is a historical corrective. As Arlene Torres has noted, there were in fact *jibaros negros* in and around the coastal regions of Puerto Rico. For Torres, the fusion of jíbaro and negro represents a “movement towards blackness” and a negation of processes of *blanqueamiento* (1998: 294); Torres perceptively

notes that such a fusion complicates the traditional construct of the Gran Familia Puertorriqueña that equates whiteness with *la cultura*—with the (national) culture.

In Luciano’s formulation, brownness/blackness encodes the possibility of a great diasporan family, translingual and transnational, yet bounded by the shared experience of racialization and oppression in the United States—unsurprisingly, the line in “Jíbaro / My Pretty Nigger” that draws the loudest reaction from the prison audience is: “and oppression makes even God smell foul!” If “Un jíbaro en Nueva York” defines diaspora as creative mistranslation, “Jíbaro / My Pretty Nigger” makes translation (e.g. from jíbaro to nigger) the source point for a politics of diasporic relation.



Top: Cover from 2006 reissue of the 1972 Willie Colón CD *Asalto Navideño*. Fania Records 130 076.

Bottom: Cover from the 2006 reissue of the 1973 Willie Colón CD *Asalto Navideño (Volumen 2)*. Fania Records, 130 081.

Asalto Navideño

Whereas the jibarisimo in “Jíbaro / My Pretty Nigger” is purely discursive—there is little evidence of a jíbaro influence in Luciano’s performance style, which for the most part adheres to the griot poetics typical of the Black Arts movement⁵—the appropriation of jíbaro music in the salsa of Willie Colón and Héctor Lavoe serves to score and underscore an internationally attuned yet specifically New York Puerto Rican aesthetics.⁶

Lavoe and Colón’s elastic and eclectic musical and performative idiom complicates notions of aesthetic and national authenticity. Undoubtedly, Lavoe’s twang and phrasing reveal an affinity with, and a substantive knowledge of, jíbaro music (including that of Chuito, an evident influence); still, as Wilson Valentín-Escobar notes, Lavoe’s “jíbaro aesthetics” (2001: 215) cannot be disentangled from the New York bad boy posturing of the music, nor from the bad boy persona asserted, somewhat tongue-in-cheekly, in the album-cover images. In many Lavoe-Colón collaborations, the line between *el jíbaro* and *el malo*, between supposedly authentic and self-consciously constructed significations, is systematically blurred, so that Lavoe’s appropriation of jíbaro music functions not simply as homage, but also, and ultimately, as “a reworking of subaltern historiography where competing discourses and narratives are subverting and entangling official accounts of the past” (Valentín-Escobar 2001: 215).

“ For Lavoe and Colón, diaspora resignifies the ‘typical’ Puerto Rican expressive culture, thus shifting the emphasis from identity-as-authentic-expression to identity-as-performative-resignification (or, perhaps, recasting the former as an instance of the latter). ”

In the two *Asalto navideño* records (released in 1972 and 1973), jíbaro music is idiosyncratically filtered through everything from murga to samba; Lavoe and Colón’s gesture of irreverent reverence is perhaps epitomized by Yomo Toro’s simultaneously rootsy and psychedelic cuatro playing, which Ed Morales accurately describes as “somewhere between Arsenio Rodríguez and Jimi Hendrix” (Morales 2006).⁷ Following Juan Flores, I wish to underscore the fact that Lavoe and Colón’s *Asalto navideño* records make productive use of ambivalence, referencing the *música típica* of Puerto Rico in atypical and unconventional ways (Flores 2004: 285), as in Toro’s idiosyncratic cuatro stylings. For Lavoe and Colón, diaspora resignifies the “typical” Puerto Rican expressive culture, thus shifting the emphasis from identity-as-authentic-expression to identity-as-performative-resignification (or, perhaps, recasting the former as an instance of the latter).

If we believe Scarano’s claim that the jíbaro has been, to a significant extent, self-consciously constructed, then we can understand Lavoe’s performance of jibarisimo, like that of Chuito before him, as a mining of the instability of this problematic founding trope. More specifically, Lavoe’s genius is to find a way of redeploying Chuito’s “symptomatic” jíbaro in New York in a simultaneously diasporan and internationalist context. Indeed, the music on the *Asalto navideño* records goes beyond the NY/PR dyad, embracing Panamanian and Brazilian rhythms, and pointing

the way to the Third World and pan-Latin Americanist sensibilities of latter-day New York salsa classics such as Colón and Rubén Blades's *Siembra* (1978).

I want to suggest that Lavoe's "internationalist" jíbaro finds his voice in the transition between an *ataque* and an *asalto*. While an *ataque* of the sort that Chuito suffered is a nervous condition partly characterized by a disavowal of agency, Lavoe's *asalto* is just that: an assault on the sensibilities of the listener/audience.⁸ Like the leader of an "asalto navideño," Lavoe, in "Aires de Navidad," is the uninvited singer who has come to take over a stranger's house; the colonized subject becomes an agent of occupation when Lavoe sings "aunque usted no quiera, le vengo a cantar." A "tour de force" in the most literal sense, Lavoe and Colón's *Asaltos* perform a forcible recalibration of the relationship between the homelands of yesteryear and the diasporas of today/tomorrow. Although not free of the sort of "humorous" self-pathologization that characterized Chuito's jíbaro in New York—I am thinking of the cover of the second *Asalto navideño*, where Lavoe and Colón, dressed up as Santa's helpers, are holding up a gas station—Lavoe and Colón move beyond the confines of the colonized Puerto Rican subject by redefining identity and community in terms of creative practice.⁹ In doing so, they "internationalize" their eclectic brand of Nuyorican jibarismo as a creative response to experiences of oppression and/or displacement. (It should go without saying that communities far removed from Puerto Rico and its diasporas have found in Lavoe and Colón's music a model for their own negotiations of identity and community).

Lavoe's performance of jibarismo involves, it should be noted, a certain sleight of hand, almost as if he would like to "have it both ways." As Juan Flores notes, at one point in the would-be *aguinaldo* "Esta Navidad" Lavoe inveighs against the "bogus jíbaros" ("jíbaros guillados") of the world, only to then identify himself as one of them (2004: 288). Flores hears the lyrics as "soy un jíbaro guillado/ pero un jíbaro de verdad" (2004: 288), but what I hear, after repeated playings of the song, is "soy un jíbaro guillado / pero de jíbaro 'e verdad," which I would translate as "I'm passing myself off as a jíbaro, but as a real/authentic jíbaro."¹⁰ (Conversely, I would translate Flores's version as "I'm passing myself off as a jíbaro, but I'm (still) a real jíbaro").

Thus, in Flores's version Lavoe is performing the role of jíbaro, but his real world jíbaro currency (Lavoe was born and raised in Puerto Rico, steeped in jíbaro music) vouchsafes the authenticity of his performance. In my version, though, Lavoe is unapologetically passing himself off as a jíbaro, and our faith in the authenticity of his performance depends *solely* on our trusting that he has the skill and good judgment to pass himself off as the real/authentic jíbaro (*which one is that?*), not the bogus kind (*which one is that?*). Lavoe's *non sequitur* assures that his "translation" of the jíbaro aesthetic will be a happy one, since, needless to say, authenticity here is a function of performance, and it is through performative sleight of hand such as Lavoe's *guille*, Colón's trombone tricks, and Toro's cuatro licks, that island and mainland, homeland and diaspora, are momentarily (and, it seems, effortlessly) brought together. Whereas Chuito, aware of an inescapable and untranslatable difference, locates identity in performative self-diagnosis (*what's the matter with Chu?*), Lavoe and Colón split that difference and invite us (even as they assault us) to witness their utterly convincing sleight of hand.

Unfazed by the nativist's anxieties—e.g. that the "real"/"authentic" jíbaro is being (or has already been) decimated, and that the (necessarily inauthentic) Puerto Rican diaspora is partly to blame for its decimation—, Lavoe ripostes by refashioning "realness" and "authenticity" in his own image. His *sui generis* performance speaks for the diaspora by recasting its *non sequiturs* into a lingua franca.

Conclusion

I have argued here that “Un jíbaro en Nueva York”’s performance of a foundational symptom provides a template for 1960s and 1970s Nuyorican cultural productions; I have also suggested how the latter locate a positive political valence in the performative mistranslations of Chuito and Ernestina. In the process, I hope to have shown how, in a New York Puerto Rican context, diaspora and performance are often intimately and complexly linked. A postcolonial thinker such as Bhabha, with his emphasis on the liberatory potential of postmodern textual strategies, does not sufficiently address the psychoanalytical complexity and productive political ambivalence of a diaspora performance such as “Un jíbaro en Nueva York.”

In El Conjunto Típico Ladí’s rendering, the jíbaro in New York survives strategically, even if the most poignant moments of Chuito’s *ataque* defy all translation. Gherovici uses the term “jaiba politics,” which she borrows from Negrón-Muntaner, Ramón Grosfoguel, and Chloé S. Georas, to illustrate how the *ataque*’s strategy of “nonheroism, nonconfrontation, and evasion could become liberating in an otherwise impossible situation” (2003: 136). *Jaiba* is, of course, an old jíbaro term, and the “jíbaro jaiba” is an iconic Puerto Rican character: the fence-sitter, the hustler, the pragmatist, the cynic, the slacker.

That is, ultimately, why Bhabha’s postcolonial mimicry cannot get at the gist of the jíbaro’s *ataque*: mimicry, however performative, is still painful, and perhaps best avoided (why suffer more than one already must?), and, in a colonial context, the idea of a liberating mimicry may be a dangerous delusion. Neither mere mimicry nor mere strategic passivity, our jíbaro’s *ataque* is an always already failed performance, but one which must be attempted nonetheless. Because one always hopes to one day succeed (to be understood, to become other-than-other) and because even if that day never comes, one still peddle one’s parodies and pains here and now, to those who can only misunderstand.

The unstable and unreadable “Un jíbaro en Nueva York,” highlights both the possibilities and the limits—the pathos and the promise—of a politics of *jaibería*. Faced with an impossible situation, and lacking a suitable language, Chuito and colleagues situate identity in process, and politics in a series of failed translations. Since *jaibería* can never provide the solidity that an unstable subject longs for, Chuito “works” the whole room, speaking to everyone and no one at once. Both a strategy as refuge and a refusal of strategy, it is a double-tracked voice, a loopy loop. Hoping we’ll join in. Laughing with us, laughing at us, laughing without us.



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NOTES

¹ I wish to underscore the interdependence between the musicians' own sense of Latinidad and the marketplace “Latin-ness” they were expected to embody. In my reading, Glasser's analysis effectively blurs the boundaries between identity-as-private-negotiation and identity-as-public-performance.

² I have included below the lyrics to “Un jíbaro en Nueva York” along with their English “translation,” as they appear in the booklet for the *The Music of Puerto Rico* CD. As I make clear in my analysis, I have my doubts about the accuracy of parts of the transcription of what Chuito and La Calandria are singing, and thus about the fidelity of the translation provided. Notice the misspellings (“hirvanar” for “hilvanar”) and missing accents (e.g. diacritics, as in “tu” and “como) in the transcription, as well as the unidiomatic turns of phrase (“They call house to the casa”) in the translation.

Ernestina:

Me dijiste hay como un mes
que tu hablas cualquier idioma
y ahora yo no trago bromas
y tienes que hablar inglés
Arrodíllate a mis pies
sin alardes y sin ruidos
y dime en versos medidos
sin que falles de algún modo,
como le dicen a todo
en los Estados Unidos

Ernestina:

You told me about a month ago
That you could speak any language
And now I'm not joking
So you have to talk in English
Kneel at my feet
Without bragging or noise
And tell me, in measured verses,
Without failing in any way
The way they name everything
in the United States

Chuito:

A la puerta dicen “doar”
al señor le dicen “ser”
al año le dicen “yiar”
¿Suegra moder in ló?
Al cuatro le dicen “foar”
al corre caballo “yoki”
al pavo le dicen “toki”
y dicen “aidia” a idea
y miedo dicen “la fria”
y al ratero “pipoket”

Chuito:

The “puerta” they call door,
“Señor” becomes sir
And “año” becomes year
“Suegra” is mother-in-law?
“Cuatro” they call four
The “corre caballo” is jockey
“Pavo” is called turkey
“Idea” is named idea
And “miedo” becomes afraid
“Ratero” is pickpocket

Ernestina:

Hay alguna analogía
en lo que me has contestado
pero aun no has terminado:

Ernestina:

There's some analogy
in what you have answered
But you are not finished

falta mucho todavía
La vida me apostaría
que aunque tomes interés,
si te diera todo el mes
el chance para pensar
tu no podrás hirvanar
otra décima en inglés

Chuito:
Al beso le dicen “kis”
para saludar, “aló”
a la hora dicen “ocló”
y a la señorita “miss”
al queso le dicen “chis”
al te amo, “ai lov yú”
al orgullo, “balijú”
le dicen “jaus” a la casa
y para decir, ¿que pasa?
“¿guasimara wiz yú?”

Ernestina:
Aunque de todas la redes
saliste con facultad
tengo la seguridad
que finalizar no puedes
Lo van a escuchar ustedes
que por su derrota brindo
porque soy cuando *me brinco*
como aquel guerrero fuerte
que dijo al pie de la muerte
muero, pero no me rindo

Chuito:
Y dicen al día “dey”
al pobre le dicen “pur”
al tan bello “beautiful”
y lo que está bien, “okey”
Y como cosa de ley
a la luna le dicen “mún”
al tono le dicen “tiun”
y en vez de fin dicen “en”
Vengan, “aploses, mai fren”
“Meni zenk yú, very sún”

There’s a lot to go yet
I would bet my life
Even though you may take an interest
If I give you a whole month and
The chance to think
You could not thread
Another décima in English

Chuito:
They call “beso” kiss,
To greet, hello
To tell time they say o’clock
And the “señorita” miss
“Queso” becomes cheese
“Te amo,” I love you
For pride, ballyhoo
They call house for the casa
And to say “¿que pasa?”
What’s the matter with you?

Ernestina:
Although from all the traps
You came out neat and clean
I am certain
You cannot wind it up
You’re going to listen now
To his defeat I toast
Because when I am mad
Like the strong warrior who,
In the face of death, said
I die, but I don’t surrender

Chuito:
And they called “día” day,
The pobre becomes poor
“Tan bello” is so beautiful
And what’s “bien” is okay
And as the law goes
The “luna” is called moon
“Tono” is tune
And instead of “fin” they say end
Let’s hear applause, my friends,
Many thanks to you, very soon

3 For an analysis of the postcolonial dimensions of Fania-era salsa see Juan Otero Garabís’s “La nación por los márgenes: salsa, migración y ciudad” in his *Nación y ritmo: descargas desde el Caribe* (2003). Otero Garabís writes: “Más que proponer una definición nacional que coloca la cultura popular en el centro, la salsa representa un discurso doblemente marginado que desestabiliza las narrativas nacionalistas y que busca su propio espacio. Como sugiere Batacumbele, la salsa se resiste a ser la jibarita de la cultura nacional” (2000: 163). Clearly, Chuito, as a subaltern body, does not represent the

national, iconic, state-sponsored “jíbaro,” but while his gesture is definitely unstable, it is not one of self-conscious political resistance, as Otero Garabís takes Fania salsa to be.

⁴ Truth be told, upon hearing the song numerous times I have reason to believe that Chuito is actually singing something else, but since I cannot decipher what that something else might be, I am following the translation that appears in the CD booklet (which reads “miedo”). In any case, the indecipherability of the lyrics is very much in keeping with my interpretation of the song as a testing of the limits of translation, and Chuito’s urgent, breathless delivery of the line very much suggests fear.

⁵ For more on the “griot poetics” of the Black Arts era, see Thomas (1998).

⁶ In fact, it has been argued (Ramos Gandía) that the opening vocal on the song “Qué bien te ves” was Lavoe’s homage to Chuito, who was one of his favorite singers (Sanabria 2006). See Colón (1975).

⁷ The term “música jíbara” may be rejected as too vague and thus imprecise; it would certainly be more accurate to refer to specific styles such as *seis* and *aguinaldo*. I have, however, chosen to use the term here, since it highlights the currency—in every sense of the word—of the “jíbaro” moniker.

⁸ This reading holds for the Lavoe of the *Asalto navideño* records, but not for the coolly self-mythologizing Lavoe of such later songs as “El cantante” (1978).

⁹ The act of performing and recording the music for the *Asalto navideño* records can be seen as an exercise in this very sort of community building; thus, the records become “records” in another sense: they document the musicians’ ongoing negotiation of the terms of community in a diaspora context. It could even be claimed that these records are concrete manifestations of the sorts of community they prophesy, realizations of what would appear to be utopian by definition. Of course, there is a homosocial, “boy’s club” dimension to this model of community. One of the reasons I find Chuito’s performance of the jíbaro in “Un jíbaro en Nueva York” so remarkable is that it both foreshadows and complicates (by stressing that in community which is incommunicable, except as symptom) Lavoe and Colón’s sonic assault. There is something queer (in every sense) to Chuito and Ernestina’s tractatus on identity and/as mistranslation which is not accounted for in Fania salsa’s visions of diaspora community.

¹⁰ Could it be that the complex politics of authenticity at work here anticipate the hip-hop aesthetic? If so, Lavoe is the Tupac of salsa: they were the martyrs/bad boys/poster boys for their respective musics, and both managed to embody a complex version of authenticity that brokered the tensions between their *sui generis* styles and their seemingly universal appeal.

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