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Creolité in the 'Hood: Diaspora as Source and Challenge

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This article highlights the role of the Puerto Rican community in New York as the social base for the creation of Latin music of the 1960s and 1970s known as salsa, as well as its relation to the island. As implied in the subtitle, the argument is advanced that Caribbean diaspora communities need to be seen as sources of creative cultural innovation rather than as mere repositories or extensions of expressive traditions in the geographical homelands, and furthermore as a potential challenge to the assumptions of cultural authenticity typical of traditional conceptions of national culture. It is further contended that a transnational and pan-Caribbean framework is needed for a full understanding of these complex new conditions of musical migration and interaction.

Key words: salsa, transnationalism, authenticity, cultural innovation, New York music, musical migration
The flight attendant let out an icy scream of terror when she noticed a pair of hefty jueyes, native Puerto Rican land crabs, strutting down the center aisle of the plane. It was one of those infamous red-eye flights from San Juan to New York, filled to the last seat with Puerto Ricans from all walks of life, while the panicky flight attendant is referred to as a stereotypical white-bred gringa, “angelical and innocent, a frigid blond like Kim Novak in her days as a frigid blond.” What is this, a prank or a hijacking? Who are these terrorist jueyes? The hysteria spread to the crew, and to the passengers, though among the boricuas there is an underlying but pervasive giggle, that familiar jocularity laced with irony that Puerto Ricans call jaiberia, or el arte de bregar, the art of dealing with the situation. The stage for a dramatic cultural collision is set.

Students of contemporary Caribbean culture may well recognize this memorable scene from the opening sentences of the fanciful creative essay by Puerto Rican author Luis Rafael Sánchez entitled “La guagua aérea,” the “air bus.” This highly entertaining and suggestive story set aboard the air shuttle known to the majority of his countrymen has become nothing less than canonical since its publication in 1983, capturing as it does the existential feel of a people caught up in a relentless process of circular migration, in which they carry their indelible cultural trappings back became the basis of a widely publicized movie; and serves as the guiding metaphor for two books about modern-day Puerto Rico, significantly titled The Commuter Nation and Puerto Rican Nation on the Move. With its irresistible title alone, la guagua aérea has assured its place as perhaps the best-known work of contemporary Puerto Rican literature.

Present-day migration, no longer the momentous, once-in-a-lifetime trauma of earlier times, is now a commute, an everyday kind of excursion, like jumping on a bus or subway and arriving at an equally familiar destination. In the story, the feeling aboard that hilariously nervous flight is so matter-of-course that passengers comment how they lose track which way they’re headed, and wonder whether they’ll be arriving in New York or San Juan. The two end-points become interchangeable, so much so that the jueyes caught and cleaned in Bayamón are sure to find their place in a stew-pot in the Bronx, no questions asked.

No serious danger of losing the culture by being away from the island, either, for the cultural practices and sensibilities typical of the home culture are just as much at home in New York, New Jersey, Chicago, or Florida. How resilient, how immutable “el arte de bregar,” how ineradicable that famous mancha de plátano! The fears of a national schizophrenia, or cultural genocide, are assuaged by the comforting sense of trans-local equilibrium.

Yet, when looked at more closely, la guagua aérea in the well-known story
native familiarity with jazz, soul, and rock. Along with his partner in crime, vocalist Héctor Lavoe, Colón projects from the beginning of his pioneering salsa career the new musical mixes resounding in his beloved Nueva York barrios, a singularly diasporic “creolité in the ‘hood.”

But it is in Asalto navideño, his immensely and enduringly popular Christmas album released in 1971, that Colón transports us on the airbus and makes the relation between diaspora and Caribbean homeland the central theme of his work. An undisputed classic of the salsa canon, this compilation puts the lie to the widespread notion that salsa is no more than an imitation of purely Cuban sources by mostly Puerto Rican exponents, and that Puerto Rican music has little or no presence. Rather, the educated listener recognizes immediately that the strongly accented son, guaracha, and guaguancó weave of the musical fabric is laced with vocal, instrumental, and rhythmic qualities typical of Puerto Rican seis, aguinaldo, bomba, and plena. Most notably, aside from the decidedly jíbaro quality of Lavoe’s vocals, Colón brings in the famed Yomo Toro on the cuatro, the emblematic instrument of traditional Puerto Rican music. This popurrí navideño (Christmas medley), as one of the cuts is titled, is clearly intended as a dialogue with Puerto Rican culture. Even the album title, using the word asalto, makes reference to the age-old tradition of Christmas-tide musical “invasions” of the houses of close friends and neighbors for the sake “Traigo la salsa” (I bring you salsa) and “Esta Navidad” (This Christmas), are of special interest to our discussion, since both lyrically and musically they enact the diaspora addressing the island culture in a complex, loving but at the same time mildly challenging way. At one level, “Traigo la salsa” is about “bringing” Latin music to the immediate New York or North American audience, and along with it holiday cheer from the warm tropics. Yet even here, it is not the usual salsa fare that is being offered; at one point the lyrics state, “Yo les traigo una rareza,” “a rarity,” and the singer goes on to explain that on this occasion he is adding in the cuatro, an instrument atypical of salsa, “por motivo de Navidad.” At this level, though, salsa plus cuatro is clearly a sign of the island cultures being “brought” to the New York scene as a delicious Christmas offering, or as an “asalto” on North American culture much like the land crabs aboard the airbus. However, there is another dimension to this act of “bearing” or “bringing” the music at play here, and it refers to bringing New York salsa to the island. Indeed, the opening words and body of the lyrics, beginning with “Oigame señor, préstame atención...,” would seem to be addressing the personified island itself, and to be saying that the singer is bringing salsa for him (“para ti”). The closing lines of the stanza, which say “como allá en la isla” (like there on the island), make this geographical differentiation evident. That is, in addition to being a marker of Puerto
diaspora have been corrupted by their experience away from the homeland and authentic home culture, and try to get over, or fake it, as captured in the word guillar. But then, in an interesting twist, the lyrics continue with the speaker identifying himself as one of those “jíbaros guillados,” a kind of bogus jíbaro, who is nonetheless, in a bold assertion, “pero un jíbaro de verdad” (but a jíbaro for real), “Hay jíbaros que saben más/y aquí queda demostrado/soy un jíbaro guillado/pero un jíbaro de verdad”; roughly, “There are jíbaros that know more/and here it’s clearly shown/I am a would-be jíbaro/but a jíbaro for real.”

What entitles this returning diaspora Puerto Rican to feel confident about his knowledge and to claim “realness” after all? Evidently it is the song itself, as suggested in the phrase “aquí queda demostrado” (here it is shown). Indeed, the song proceeds to the chorus, “Esta navidad, vamos a gozar,” and then ends in vocal and instrumental improvisations very much in the guaguancó-based salsa style, the tumbaito, which by the end explicitly replaces the trappings and cadences of típica, the leilo-lai, with which it had begun. Or actually, in tune with that diasporic wisdom suggested in the lyrics, the lead voice draws the traditional holiday music into the eclectic, inclusive jam of this special Christmas celebration, making sure to add, “también invitáre a mi amigo, mi amigo Yomo Toro” (I’ll also invite my friend, my dear friend Yomo Toro).

The music known as salsa, then, which has become the prototypical marker of Spanish

Even prior to the official advent of salsa by that name, and in even more dramatic ways, Nuyorican and Cuban musicians and music publics had fused son and mambo sounds with vernacular African-American styles such as rhythm and blues and soul music, as evidenced in the short-lived but wildly popular experiments of Latin boogaloo. And more famously, in the 1940s New York Latin music had witnessed the momentous innovations of Cubop and Latin jazz, which along with the mambo were more strongly rooted in the urban diaspora than in the Caribbean, the original home of those traditions.

But it is in times closer to our own, with the dramatic growth and increased diversity of the Caribbean diaspora, and with decades of ongoing interaction with Afro-American culture, that we witness the full force of diaspora as source and challenge in Caribbean music history. In the post-salsa period, it is hip hop that has emerged as the most influential and innovative field of musical expression in most parts of the Caribbean. In this case there can of course be no doubt as to the music’s urban diasporic origins, though it is still less than accepted knowledge that Puerto Ricans, Jamaicans, Dominicans, and other Caribbean diaspora peoples and their musics played a formative role in its story since the beginning in the 1970s and 80s. Purists and traditionalists from those background cultures are still bent on denying or minimizing the Caribbean-ness or Latinismo of hip hop in its many manifestations, regarding it as strictly African American; at times, as in the call to
Puerto Rican young people who had never left the national territory. Such radical challenges to traditional cultural values and assumptions, largely associated with the hip hop invasion, have retained their appeal in subsequent decades, such that important young verbal artists like Tego Calderón and José Raúl González ("Gallego") continue to voice a fresh sense of what it means to be Puerto Rican in our changing times, in both cases with positive reference to the example set by their counterparts in the diaspora.

From being an isolated, subcultural phenomenon on the Island's cultural scene, rap has over the years established its place as a ubiquitous component of everyday life, vibrantly present in town festivals, religious events, and at activities on street corners, in schoolyards and neighborhood parks. It has also found its place in the country's musical soundscape, and has been fused with more familiar styles such as salsa, bomba, and plena. Hip hop's presence in Puerto Rico also has its Caribbean dimensions, its introduction coinciding in significant ways with the inroads of reggae and merengue, with meren-rap and reggaeton being but the best known of the varied fusions and crossovers present in the contemporary repertoire.

Nor is Puerto Rico unique, of course, in its importation of rap via its return diaspora aboard la guagua aérea. The influence of its huge diasporas in New York and San Juan has been of dramatic note in the Dominican

“Social and racial discrimination as experienced by thousands of Dominicans in the urban ghettos of New York made them aware of their actual racial constitution, and taught them that they are not too different from the West Indian neighbors.... Many returned to Santo Domingo and their home towns transformed both outwardly and inwardly in their thoughts, their clothes, their feelings, their language, and their music.... Afro-Caribbean music and dance were incorporated into Dominican folk dances and songs, particularly in the national merengue, while music groups expanded their repertoires,..., showing, not always consciously, how much Afro-American culture had pervaded Dominican popular culture. The discovery of Dominican négritude was not the result of an intellectual campaign as had been the case in Haiti and Martinique, after Jean Price-Mars and Aimé Césaire. The real discovery of the Dominican black roots was a result of the behavior of the returning migrants.... Racial and cultural denial worked for many years, but migration to the United States finally cracked down the ideological block of the traditional definition of Dominican national identity.”

All over the Carribean, and in growing numbers of countries in the postcolonial era, “The diaspora strikes back!”

Throughout their history Caribbean cultures have been traveling cultures, transformative departures and arrivals to and from, between and among and en
creative innovations have resulted from the travels and sojourns of musicians themselves, and for over a century recordings, radio broadcasts, movies and television, and the whole range of media have exposed musical practitioners and audiences to music-making from elsewhere, in great preponderance from the disproportionately endowed metropolitan centers, and very often as part of the imperial project.

But today’s musical remittances are different; there has been a shift, as one study of the history of merengue in New York puts it, “from transplant to transnational circuit.” That is, these musical remittances are not just contemporary instances of traveling musics or of media-induced exoticist fascination, whether that fascination is based on healthy curiosity or on ideological or commercial persuasion. Rather, the return “home” of Caribbean music, which has been re-cycled through the urban diaspora experience, is a mass collective and historically structured process corresponding directly to patterns of circular migration and the formation of transnational communities. The musical baggage borne by return diasporas, while rooted in the traditions and practices of the Caribbean cultures of origin, are forged in social locations having their own historical trajectories and stylistic environments, and are thus simultaneously internal and external to the presumed parameters of national and regional musical cultures. It is this ambivalence that goes to explain the mix of consternation and adulation with which members of the

nor can they be squared neatly with the musical and cultural dynamic at work in the societies from which they originally sprang.

Much of this work of transnational diffusion, of course, is done by the corporate media, and aligns directly with the taste-making and trend-setting projects and hierarchies of imperial power. No doubt “transnationalism from above” remains a prominent if not the predominant driving power behind this uprooting and re-routing of styles and practices and their re-introduction into the societies of origin in diluted and bastardized form. But since it is prevailing regimes of accumulation and the coercive management of flexible labor forces that impel patterns of circulatory migration and manage the shifting locations of transnational communities, the formation and the re-location of diaspora musics and cultures may also exemplify the process of what is called “transnationalism from below,” that is, nonhegemonic and to some degree counter-hegemonic transnationalism, or, as one commentator capsulized it, “labor’s analog to the multinational corporation.”

Despite and in the face of corporate and state power, Caribbean music today, and its movement to and from its massive diasporas, remains popular music in the deepest and most persistent sense: whether in the region or in its diasporic settings, and in its migration back and forth between them, it lives on as the vernacular expression of people and communities seeking, and finding, their own voice and rhythm.

All of this, and more, are lessons to