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Musical Trans/actions: Intersections in Reggaetón

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Abstract

This essay looks at contemporary debates over the authenticity of reggaetón as a musical genre. In discussing popular and critical assessments of the genre the author suggests sincerity as a more appropriate approximation to the affective and locational strategies of reggaetón. Attending to a variety of examples from lyrics to performance and video, the author suggests ways in which reggaetón articulates its local roots in Puerto Rican culture and experience while making explicit the global circuitries that such an identification entails.

Key words: authenticity, reggaeton, sincerity, glocal, dance

I. Hip-Hop Overtures: Introduction to a Polemic

“Reggaeton is a sellout subgenre and its artists don’t reflect their reality realistically and/or seek to express themselves originally and cleverly.”

“Essentially, if these lyrics rep the Boricua hoods in Borinquen, niggas is weak hoping for wicked.”

“Any Raggaeton song that doesn’t have the whore-inducing hook, weak, diluted posturing and pulsing, grafted swagger sayings, hip for a Telemundo commercial, is no longer a Reggaeton song.”

Sunez, “The Real Music: Time to Disassociate”

In an heated attack on reggaetón as a sellout musical “subgenre,” excerpted in the epigraph above, popular blogger and Lavoe Revolt editor Sunez expressed his frustration with the commercialization of Black and Latin/american musical cultures and what he describes as the treason of reggaetón to the older and, in his estimation, ultimately more legitimate genre of hip-hop. Labeling the formal qualities of reggaetón as derivative, Sunez not only refuels ongoing debates over the origins and identification claims of this musical culture but showcases a line of argument around authenticity and commercialization that shapes many a conversation about the social dynamics enacted in popular musical practice today. Such an argument relies on a suspicion of commercialization as a corrupting influence in the autochthonous expression of racial minorities and other marginalized communities. Additionally, this line of thinking invests in a reclamation program that seeks to install a narrative of origin and ownership over cultural forms and guards against appropriation by commercial interests.

While I share the concern about the potentially corrupting dynamics of appropriation in commercial musical cultures today and what these do to disenfranchise local creative expressions for the benefit of global commercial viability, I lament the rigid boundaries that result from Sunez’s orthodoxy over the essence of the genre. As more of a provocateur, Sunez’s orthodoxy is also an example of what is lacking in contemporary discussions of authenticity and the sometimes overlapping analysis of grassroots and commercial musical culture.
circum-Caribbean and its diaspora, the debates about origins and/or the anxiety over commercialization result in too rapid a dismissal as a sellout form.

In this essay I seek to outline the foundations of the current debates over reggaetón’s “authenticity” as a musical genre or community performance. I rely on contemporary scholarship on cultural performance and authenticity (Johnson, 2003; Jackson, 2005; Dyson, 2007) to argue for a more flexible model of evaluation for pop music subgenres like reggaetón that moves beyond rigid interpretations of authenticity onto articulating the web of relations activated in the wide array of cultural productions taking place under its banner. I also identify an over-reliance, by critics and defenders alike, on too narrow a genealogy of musical practice that ignores the broader performance maneuvers (from dance and gesture to the visual languages of fashion and video) articulated in this subcultural form. I begin with an analysis of Sunez’s recent critique of reggaetón in his on-line journal and responses articulated in the blogosphere by scholars of hip-hop such as Raquel Rivera and Wayne Marshall in order to pinpoint the risks involved in too narrow a listening for reggaetón’s agency.[5] My intention here is not to dismiss the important work being produced in music studies and popular media venues dedicated to critical thinking about culture and politics but to offer alternatives to what I identify as the blind spots resulting from a phonocentric analysis of reggaetón.[5]

I suggest a different route to the understanding of reggaetón that articulates the politics behind a more nuanced attention to the means of production—the social and material relations that shape the making, distribution and reception of reggaetón—as well as a broader focus on strategies of representation—the actual production of meaning through image, sound and movement. These critical interventions, I argue, are central to the important work Rivera and Marshall have produced on the genre and texture my own readings of reggaetón’s playful engagement with local and global performance circuits. In engaging the complex cultural intersection constituted in this pop music subgenre I turn to the music video in the final section of this essay as an arena of activity within reggaetón that has garnered little critical attention thus far. I look at Calle 13’s “La jirafa” (2006) and Tego Calderón’s “Tradicional a lo bravo” (2007) to suggest a differently articulated politics of the local that might reflect an investment in Puerto Rican alternative aesthetics in popular music by trafficking in the techniques, labor force, and history of live theatre culture in the Island.

The primary objective of this essay is thus to expand the terms of the debate over reggaetón’s commercialization. I highlight performance trans(actions) that strategically mark the local outside the ossifying discourses of authenticity. This critical move I suggest requires a shift from listening to reggaetón for musical purity to a careful engagement with broader performance repertoires, including what John Mundy has termed the “visual economy” of music (1999). Throughout, I stress the importance of engaging this musical genre as a broad performance culture with increasing potential to intervene in the public sphere both locally and globally.

II. Contested Authenticities: Musical Cultures and the Question of Agency

Reggaetón is a musical genre grounded on the rhythmic base of Jamaican dancehall and the vocal rap-style declaration of hip-hop. These elements have been combined in a wide array of musical configurations that incorporate other Latin/o American genres such as salsa, bachata, Puerto Rican bomba y plena, and merengue to develop stylistic variations over a fairly constant musical pattern. The origins of the reggaetón sound are argued differently depending on the scholar or connoisseur who relays its history.[4] However, reggaetón as a term has come to designate an early 21st Century Puerto Rico-based commercial versioning of a variety of musical experiments that include reggae and dancehall in Panamá, Jamaican dancehall influences on hip-hop in New York City, and their respective crossings with a burgeoning “underground” rap scene in Puerto Rico since the late 1980s and throughout the 1990s (themselves versions of earlier East coast hip-hop music born out of African-American, Afro-Caribbean, and Puerto Rican collaborations in New York City’s South Bronx). Additionally, reggaetón has incorporated pop musical influences ranging from alternative rock to techno. Contemporary variations continue to emerge outside of Puerto Rico as well and a growing scene of reggaetón music has emerged in Cuba and the Dominican Republic to name but two of the most cited examples.[4]

To such a circuitous history of musical exports and imports, collaborations and less collaborative “borrowings,” we must add the complications of traversing from subcultural to commercial contexts and back as the genre developed out of a myriad of cultural dynamics that are just as difficult to outline but which carry in their sounds and other cultural manifestations a history of grassroots innovation, commercial cocooning of commercially produced expression, and so on. Reggaetón emerges out of the transnational flow of commercial and subcultural musical practices and their merging with local Puerto Rican urban practices (themselves born out of age-old circuits of cultural influence). But the commercial viability of reggaetón is in large part due to equally transnational economies of circulation since the genre was able to “cross over” to international markets thanks in large part to its traffic amongst New York Puerto Rican and Dominican communities. The genre is thus diasporically constituted and distributed (Marshall and Pacini Hernández, 2009).

The simple dismissal of reggaetón enacted in Sunez’s blog simplifies the web of relations that shape this musical culture. As Wayne Marshall observes in his discussion of Daddy Yankee’s commercial reggaetón anthem, “Gasolina,” detractors of the overproduced crossover aesthetics might simply dismiss it as “the latest quasi-Caribbean commercial confection.” However, focused attention or “a closer listen” might allow a more complicated set of relationships to emerge. He continues:

In particular, if one attends more carefully to the sights and/or sounds (or strategically alters the temporality and spatiality) of these music videos, then the overt commerciality and global appeal of the genre, which has often been dismissed in commentary such as Sunez’s, is shown to have a complicated and layered history, both locally and globally. This history is not without legacies or consequences for the musical and democratic potential of reggaetón in the Caribbean and its diaspora. As I argue in the final section of this essay, the visual and narrative elements of reggaetón videos are important to the genre’s contemporary success in Puerto Rico, Cuba, and the Dominican Republic and as a transnational music genre on a growing video network that includes YouTube, MySpace, and Facebook. This visual economy is also critical to the genre’s political potential as it intervenes in the public sphere both locally and globally.
race and place (2009: 19).

Encouraging a deep listening to social relations behind the aesthetic lineage of reggaetón, Marshall invites a move past the easy dismissal of commercial cultural production and proposes a more embodied approach to understanding musical practice. This strategy, while focused on the musical text as object of study, moves past closed musicological queries into formal technical and stylistic points of connection to venture into an analysis of the interconnections between aesthetic convention and material culture. Marshall’s meticulous articulation of reggaeton’s multiracial social, cultural and economic history is precisely what is flattened in Sunez’s provocative but myopic reading of the genre.

In keeping with his traditional fare of hip-hop wisdom and grassroots political thinking, Sunez presented a compelling argument for the losses at stake in the push to transform hip-hop into commerce. While he acknowledges the broader community of contributors to hip-hop—including African American, Afro-Caribbean and Latinos (Puerto Ricans in particular)—in a move that at once corrects the historical record and scolds the erasure of multiracial and multiethnic history of the genre as a deplorable side-effect of commercialization, he is quick to pigeonhole reggaetón as a derivative aesthetic and devalues it for being one of those “subgenres that have no musical advancement to ever mention and only distinguish themselves via the particular ethnicity participating.” While hip-hop’s collective history is asserted, reggaetón’s own multiple influences are bypassed in a gesture that accuses its practitioners of misappropriating hip-hop and declare their aesthetic and reach as all too narrowly Puerto Rican. It is precisely this limited understanding of the identity of the genre that leads Sunez to further dismiss it as “a label of wretched waste a particular ethnicity can now call their own. And only their own.”

Sunez’s marshalling of hip-hop relies on an account of the damages the genre incurs when distanced from its local, if diverse, subcultural values as it “sells and immediately sells out.” Alternatively, he dismisses reggaetón for keeping too close a connection to its community of origin (Island Puerto Ricans) despite commercialization. The contradictions in this argument are surprising yet characteristic of the ambivalences in the broader debate over reggaetón dating back to assessments of its precursors, rap en español and reggae en español, when first noticed as thriving subcultures in Puerto Rico’s poor and working class urban communities at the end of the 20th Century. Evaluations of the genre in Puerto Rico have similarly questioned the originality or authenticity of reggaetón. As Raquel Z. Rivera and Frances Negrón-Muntaner have recently observed “reggaetón has been attacked as immoral, as well as artistically deficient, a threat to the social order, apolitical, misogynist, a watered-down version of hip-hop and reggae, the death sentence of salsa, and a music foreign to Puerto Rico” (2007).

Reggaetón as a musical genre has been dismissed as too Puerto Rican (Sunez) or not Puerto Rican enough (Torres Torres). What is most interesting is that arguments about ethnic or racial authenticity or lack thereof are often masked behind a veil of technical scrutiny that guards for proper engagement with the codes and conventions of musical form. References to the thumping repetitive dembow rhythm[6] are often rehearsed as an introduction to objections to reggaetón as mindless party music devoid of the social consciousness the genre’s reliance on a single rhythmic metric, oftentimes labeled as a foreign import, is equally deployed to minimize the skill and creativity of this music. While the objections to reggaetón vary from informed political evaluation to sheer moral panic, its formal musical qualities are often slighted or caricatured in a blame game that often locates fault in either the alleged foreign or appropriative nature of the genre to Puerto Rican and hip-hop cultures alike. The question of authenticity—be it musical, racial or national—is always at the heart of many of these dismissals.

Cultural anthropologist John L. Jackson has observed the ways in which hip-hop generally guards authenticity based on “geographically grounded” notions of class, race, nation, among other categories. He explains:

As one of its foundational gestures, hip-hop demands of its fans and practitioners alike a geographical grounding of all identities—be that grounding neighborhood-specific, citywide, regional, nationalistic, or even post-imperial. Whether debating hip-hop’s origin stories or presentist impulses (i.e., distinguishing between where people are “from” and where they are “at”), mooring selves firmly to particular locations has become a way for hip-hop artists and fans to translate their individual experiences into culturally intelligible narratives (2005: 176).

This dynamic of place making in hip-hop invests in local credentializing by activating a repertoire of references to the assumed geography of the genre (e.g., South Bronx, New York City, Southeast United States, West Coast). These repertoires are not only manifest in narrative lyrics about place but also present in extra-lyrical vocal shout-outs (recorded and in live performance) and the citation of assumed “local” or “regional” aesthetic markers in musical, visual and performance productions. Citing this complex of signifiers performs the local or regional as an authenticating gesture within an otherwise globalized industry.

Reggaetón as a musical subculture or sub/genre with close links to hip-hop similarly participates in such a logic of geographical identification. While New York City and the South Bronx in particular are often rehearsed as the origin of hip-hop aesthetc for diasporic Puerto Ricans (albeit various narratives of participation in other locales such as the Chicago scene), reggaetón has been articulated as primarily an Island Puerto Rican sub/genre. This locational difference has been evidenced through references to the formal variations from “pure” hip-hop form to be found in its codes and conventions, be it its use of Spanish language, its incorporation of other local musical influences, or explicit geographical references in the lyrics and extra-musical performances.

Sunez’s particular take on reggaetón is grounded on the question of hip-hop authenticity and the geography of New York City Black and Latina/o culture in particular. His reading of reggaetón’s departure from hip-hop into a presumed exclusivity as Island Puerto Rican is veiled behind a formal aesthetic annulment. His analysis is based on an evaluation of reggaetón’s musical qualities and
conventions of hip-hop as a violent appropriation. He states:

The phantasm of Reggaeton is that instead of appropriating just the musical components of hip hop (i.e. there is literally only one breakbeat used in reggaeton) they also rob the lyrical component. By not singing the major lyric portions of the tracks (i.e. Freestyle), they raid the real Hip Hop of its swagger. (Suné 2008).

The formal elements of reggaetón—from the breakbeat to the lyrical style of the MC’s spoken delivery—are declared the exclusive territory of the “real” hip-hop. Reggaetón’s incursion into these practices, especially in the “diluted” fashion Suné remarks upon, preempts any claim to originality. By not freestyling or singing most of the lyrics, he argues, reggaetón performs a genre crossing that results in an unauthorized misappropriation of the hip-hop swagger. Following a purist argument for the component elements of hip-hop declares reggaetón as simply a bad copy of the original and opens the door for negative comparisons to “exemplary” figures in the field—from MCs to producers—since the standards by which “skills” get identified and measured do not belong to the specificities of the subgenre under discussion. Furthermore, the argument around genre articulated here suggests that should reggaetón opt for a singerly approach to its vocal delivery it would result in appropriate classification as a separate genre. However, an invitation to venture into such an aesthetic difference would equally distance reggaetón from a hip-hop aesthetic since singing within traditionalist definitions of hip-hop remains a suspect practice.

Singing, as Jackson has observed in his assessment of genre crossings in hip-hop, is often looked at as anathema to rapping (2005: 187). While rappers who perform singing venture into the aesthetic borderlands that define authentic hip-hop from its corruptions, reggaetón’s lack of singing represents a dangerous border crossing that brings it too close to the territory of hip-hop. Yet, Suné’s proposition prescribes singing as a possible exit from the legitimacy question that haunts reggaetón. In delineating aesthetic borders between hip-hop and reggaetón, Suné’s approach ignores the different metrics—aesthetic and social—that reggaetón and most other manifestations or variations of hip-hop activate in their on-the-ground engagements with musical practice.

The debate over rapping versus singing serves as a safeguard to protect hip-hop as a genre that Suné locates quite specifically in an East Coast aesthetic and social geography. More specifically it narrows the possibilities for Puerto Rican participants in hip-hop who although historically connected to such geography have been historically absent from it in public accounts of this musical culture. As Juan Flores and Raquel Rivera have documented thoroughly, Puerto Rican participation in hip-hop has been suspiciously kept out of the public sphere in favor of narratives that seek to install the tradition within an exclusive history of African-American cultural production (Flores, 2000; Rivera, 2003). While Suné’s account of the origin of hip-hop honors such participation, the aesthetic parameters that he imposes rely on assumptions of the genre and its ownership that enact similar if less explicit dismissals.

This boundary setting for hip-hop as a musical practice is often motivated by an effort to protect particular histories and versions of black creativity in the United States that have endured a great deal of dismissals in their own right. As Michael Eric Dyson has observed:

You definitely see that going on in hip hop. And its investment in the authenticity debates is even bigger because of the political context in which hip hop has developed—aesthetic put-downs, derision of its musical and cultural contributions, doubt about whether it is a permanent or passing form of music, accusations of adding pathological and nihilistic elements to the culture. All of this stuff guarantees that hip hop, more than any form of African American cultural and musical expression, will obsess over who can produce it and record it (2007: 6).

The similarities among the obstacles hip-hop and reggaetón have encountered in their development as cultural forms are uncannily similar. Their responses to such pressures have also been correspondingly alike, especially in their recurrence to a language of authenticity that seeks to situate each of the genres within specific socio-cultural geographies. While hip-hop has ventured into a narrative of authentic blackness, reggaetón has arguably relied on an engagement with Puerto Ricaness. Interestingly, arguments for reggaetón’s authenticity have often been supported through references to both the aesthetic conventions of hip-hop and the performance of Puerto Rican identities in both explicit references in lyrics and in its citation of “local” musical genres. This is true especially when confronting criticism waved by traditionalists in the Island who see the subgenre as a deviation from more authorized popular musical practice already properly embraced as Puerto Rican. This dual referential network results in a narrative confusion that I argue productively outlines the limitations over assuming a fixed geography for reggaetón.

For example, listening to reggaetón in search of “pure” hip-hop is not only an impossible task as the genre is itself a hybrid one, but judging its efficacy—political or otherwise—based on this comparison distances the analysis from the actual preoccupations and aesthetic logics of this musical culture. Alternatively, strictly locating reggaetón as a national Puerto Rican phenomenon limits the complex circuitry—musical and identitarian—at the heart of a subculture that oftentimes challenges the boundaries of national geography conceptualized in Island politics. Critics and defenders alike have nonetheless grounded their evaluations of reggaetón on a fairly traditional hearing for its hip-hop lineage or an assertion of its Puerto Ricanness that harks back to a national economy grounded on folklorized performance. What roots and/or routes can be identified to map the geography of the genre? Where and how does reggaetón make claim to its own economies of authenticity?

Some answers may be found in the critical gestures undertaken by reggaetón’s defenders to authenticate it as a legitimate musical sub/genre. In a posting in her blog Reggaetonica, Raquel Z. Rivera responded to Suné’s charges of reggaetón’s lack of hip-hop authenticity and skill by pointing to Puerto Rican reggaetón performer Tego Calderón as a counterexample that lives up to the “standards” of hip-hop skills. Rivera’s response reads:
Rivera’s argument seeks to credentialize Calderón’s skills by translating the aesthetics of reggaetón to the metrics of ‘real’ hip-hop. She acknowledges Calderón’s commercial aesthetics but points to his playful engagement with language, his proficiency at delivering his words with careful intervention in the rhythmic patterns of the music, and his affirmative engagement with blackness and working class politics as appropriately hip-hop. “Subtlety” in his management of virtuosic skill, the cool factor we might identify in much early hip-hop, emerges as further indication of authentic belonging to the genre. Rivera’s assessment is not a hip-hop exclusive one either. In approaching the evaluation criteria of reggaetón she calls forth a comparison to salsa, and sonero Ismael Rivera in particular. This strategic move, and its comparative assessment to the singerly performance of the salsa sonero, is significant as it appropriately gestures beyond an economy of hip-hop purism to seek an understanding of reggaetón that looks at the genre in all its complexities, histories, and influences.

Others have responded to the issue of authenticity in the heated debate that ensued (and continues to develop) in Reggaetónica by documenting Calderón’s incorporation of “roots genres” from bomba and plena to salsa as evidence of the deeply engaged musical practices incorporated into reggaetón’s sampling palette. This evidence is often put forth to demonstrate reggaetón’s affirmative Puertoricaness and thus claim national cultural authenticity against charges of lacking hip-hop authenticity. But the “roots” and routes of reggaetón are undoubtedly transnational. As Rivera and Negrón-Muntaner have observed “reggaeton may at times imagine the nation as a contained space, but this notion of the local is composed of globalized cultures” (2007). This suggests a model of reggaeton that respects the hybrid nature of its formal elements and intended address while allowing for practices of localization that traffic on local markers of identity be they racial, national or otherwise.

I suggest that reggaetón needs to be understood outside the gridlock of authenticity in a gesture that opens up to the complexities that emerge between local and global, commercial and sub-cultural aspects of the genre. This approach seeks to account for recent observations by scholars who have variously acknowledged local, national and regional geographical claims in reggaetón. Ángel Quintero Rivera, for example, notes the increased internationalization of reggaetón as a musical culture while observing that although “their styles are still intrinsically tied to Afro-American and Latin urban expressions, they have recently to emphasize a continental Latin American identity (2007: 90).” Jillian Baez similarly explains that “reggaeton functions as an exchange of cultural production between Puerto Ricans on the Island, Puerto Ricans on the U.S. mainland, other Latin Americans and Latin/o/African Americans, and other peoples of the Caribbean (2006: 64).” She further observes that preceding the commercial internationalization of the genre but also because of it, reggaetón has emerged an “ever-more powerful national symbol of puertorriqueñidad” (ibid). Thus, reggaetón figures as both a commercially circulated musical genre with international reach and a localized phenomenon for cultural nationalism. Deborah Pacini-Hernandez (2005) has argued as much, suggesting reggaetón as a pan-Latino musical genre whose hybridity has allowed its wide appeal and usage across Latin/o/national enclaves while strategic localizations from Puerto Rican continuing claims on the genre with musical traditions as varied as bomba and salsa. She notes similar dynamics at place in Dominican incursions into mixtures of reggaetón with merengue or bachata. Jan Fairley (2006) also documented similar (trans)actions in Cuba’s reggaetón scene. If reggaetón operates in such a myriad of geographies and cultural dynamics then how is its authenticity argued for or against? How are reggaetón’s global sounds valued as local practice?

III. Performance Economies: Sincerity and Local Strategies in Reggaetón

I seek to offer an understanding of reggaetón that accounts for these multiplicities by actually moving beyond claims of authenticity. I am convinced that, as performance studies scholar E. Patrick Johnson has aptly observed in his discussion of the performance of blackness, when recurring to the rhetoric of authenticity “the outcome has often been a political agenda that has excluded more voices than it has included (2003: 3).” His theoretical solution relies on a centering of performance as both methodological approach and object of study to attend to the ways in which blackness is appropriated across specific social and cultural contexts. Dislodging the act of appropriation from a fixed signifier, Johnson proposes a negotiated model for the articulation of blackness whereby subjects variably perform race relative to histories of social relations but without relying on a necessarily predetermined script. As such, blackness emerges in performance textured by a repertoire of prior performances but also open to the improvisational maneuvers of quotidian cultural enactments. All performances of race appropriate prior performances to politically diverse ends. I suggest an approach to reggaetón that attunes to the complex of appropriations—from hip-hop to salsa and beyond—that are activated in articulating equally performative categories such as race and nation.11

John L. Jackson’s incursions into the debate over authenticity are equally useful here. Similarly observing authenticity’s tendency to objectify culture in a dynamic where the authority of the expert defines the parameters to determine what is and what is not authentic, he offers sincerity as a quality of performance that preferences the intent or agency of the performer over rigid social scripts. Drawing on Lionel Trilling’s discussion of both terms, Jackson explains:

Where authenticity lauds content, sincerity privileges intent—an interiorized intent that decentralizes the racial seer (and the racial script), allowing for the possibility of performative ad-libbing and inevitable acceptance of trust amid uncertainty as the only solution to interpersonal ambiguity. With sincerity as a model, one still does not see into the other, one still does not know if one can trust the other’s performances (a partially and steely eyed skepticism it shares with authenticity discourse); however one recognizes that people are not simply racial objects (to be verified from without) but racial subjects...
performers as agents activate repertoires of behavior to make public their sense of self. These enactments are approached from a critical position that looks beyond the rigid parameters of authenticity to allow particularized interpretations or approximations to occur. I suggest that Jackson’s sincerity might serve as an optic to understand Johnson’s dynamics of appropriation in a critical move that loosens the boundaries of authentic performance codes and conventions in favor of an examination of the varied manifestations possible in using particular aesthetic practices or identitarian categories. I move past an objectification of reggaetón as appropriately hip-hop, or black, or Puerto Rican, into an engagement with the sub/genre that asks how is reggaetón and the appropriations it enacts motivated by local negotiations that vary depending on specific contexts and iterations. In doing so I suggest a temporary pause to discussions over the borders of authentic musical practice in favor of an engagement with the broader performance complex that is reggaetón.

In turning to the language of sincerity I want to return to Tego Calderón as a test case for the analytical shift I propose. Originally resistant to jump into the reggaetón bandwagon as not to lose his rap/hip-hop credibility, Calderón began to experiment with the dembow beat with clear intentions to break into the musical mainstream. In his song “Loíza” he points to the rising popularity of the sub/genre. However, despite his commercial intentions he did not understand his incursion into reggaetón as a sellout practice. In an interview with Raquel Rivera published in Centro Journal he explicitly rejects the genre distinctions that would assume the rapper’s incursions into reggaetón and vice-versa as unwarranted and separates the commercial nature of the music business from his sincere performance of black Puerto Ricanness. His explanation is worth extensive citation:

There exists this myth that those who rap cannot sing reggaetón in the Island. All this comes from...how do you call it...a notion of the real, lo real. These dumb asses...sorry, but I consider them a bunch of dumb asses that are self-imposing all these rules. I don’t know who put them in place. I think music is music always and when you do something with your heart, with quality, and with consciousness, well one can do anything. My record has salsa, it has reggae roots...My record has all kinds of music. And who is going to tell me that I am not real? I am real to what I am, to Tego Calderón. You are real to what you create. I am real to what I am. And I never veer away from it. Comments like those coming from those schmucks truly bother me. What kind of real? You have not recorded a record your whole life. You have not a heart? Real from what? You are real if you record salsa because you are boricua, because you are not a gringo. What kind of real? But it is the case that one encounters such arguments. I struggled a lot. I was also one of those who thought “ah real real real.” The thing is that this is a business and that is the truth. In Puerto Rico reggaetón is liked very much and that by the way is what got me where I am. Now a lot of people listen to my rap because I recorded reggaetón. If I would have continued in rap it would have probably had a smaller audience. But because I recorded a reggaetón song I can reach a lot more people. A lot of people will listen to my song “Loíza,” that will also listen to my song “Gracias,” that will listen to “Planté bandera” by Chamaco Ramírez and will listen to the bomba that is in my record. You understand? That is what I am real to. To what I think, to my people, and to my elders (Rivera 2004: 276-277).[8]

Calderón’s discourse on reggaetón and hip-hop acknowledges the economies of authenticity that surround these forms, including his own participation in this line of thinking earlier in his career, but also points in a different and more critical direction. He highlights his strategic maneuvers in trying to develop a commercially viable career by relying on the popular tastes of his potential audiences. Most importantly, he outlines the ways in which this strategy may still allow agency to emerge outside of mere commercial interests. Calderón achieves his stance by questioning strict parameters of hip-hop realness that rely all too comfortably on the gate keeping of aesthetic conventions. He grabs onto a language of realness and opens it to a complex of appropriations that blur the boundaries across musical genres from reggaetón and salsa to rap and bomba. The result is a valuing of citationality akin to hip-hop’s sampling. And much like in hip-hop’s debates over originality, all of these crossings are acceptable in his aesthetic pronouncement as long as they remain true to a creative process that is grounded in a fidelity to place. His response to hip-hop realness is thus to invest in the reallness of his ideas, his community and his elders.

I believe that Calderón’s shift from musical evaluation to cultural location brings us out of the realm of authenticity and into practices of sincerity as Jackson has defined them. Calderón articulates an engagement with reggaetón that invests in a performance of realness without installing a dogma of exclusivity. Referencing his incorporation of salsa and bomba as cultural markers outside the fixed definitions of musical purity, he articulates a genealogy of forms that situates his practice squarely in a geography of blackness. But unlike Sunez’s and others’ objections to reggaetón’s all too ethnic specificity, the geography mapped out in Calderón’s oeuvre is translocal in nature. The geographies referenced in the citation mentioned above (“Loíza,” “Gracias,” and “Planté bandera”) model this gesture. They offer a clear example of the flexible spatialities of Puerto Rican blackness Calderón articulates in his music.

For example, “Loíza,” a traditional hip-hop track characteristic of his work as a rapper, refers to the historically black neighborhood along the north coast of Puerto Rico just a few miles from San Juan proper. Claimed as a cradle of black creativity in the Island from music to artisanal production, Loíza also serves as a tourist destination in proximity to the Condado and Isla Verde tourist strips where foreign visitors encounter and consume Puerto Rican blackness in the form of rituales típicas (traditional food stalls) by the beach. But while Calderón traffics in the celebratory identification of Loíza as black, he catapults from the rhetoric of black pride into a critical history of race relations that acknowledges the disenfranchisement of the community from the experience of slavery to contemporary neglect and discrimination in the hands of the police. He remarks “cambiste las cadenas por esposas/you changed your chains for handcuffs.” His descriptors for Loíza bypass tourist fetishization and simple folkloric nationalism to air publicly the ongoing history of racism in the Island. Towards the end of the song he amplifies Loíza from a discreet locale to an icon of black Puerto Rican experience. The song closes as follows:
Boricua, a term that marks local pride and identification through reference to the indigenous name for the Island, Borinquen, extends Loíza to the “nation.” In a traditional act of signature marking he names himself in el Abayarde, a nickname he has assumed as his performance identity and which refers to a particularly aggressive and industrious ant. And it is precisely the ant’s sting, the politicized sincerity of his music, what he performs forcefully (fuertemente) to wake his people up (pa’ despertar a mi gente), Calderón’s critical gesture ends with a return to the specific by remarking on the beauty of Loíza as a metonymic stand-in for the black community and saluting his producing deejay, DJ Adam, as co-performer at the end of the song.

If in “Loíza” Calderón offers a geography of blackness that casts the nation to a different shade, in “Gracias” he offers a salute to a particularly classed Puerto Rican community, from “caserios to barrios” (the projects to the hoods), and thanks them for their support as loyal fans and inspiration to his music. In “Plánte bandera” Calderón’s spatial politics move explicitly into the realm of artistic practice by citing one of salsa’s most popular anthems. Composed by Tite Curet Alonso, performed by trumpet virtuoso Tommy Olivencia’s orchestra with vocals by Chamaco Ramirez and released in 1975 in an LP of the same title, “Plánte bandera” is a song that narrates personal achievement despite the odds. The lyrics address an omniscient source of authority: “Tú te creías/Que eras dueño de todo/Y me decías/Que el mundo andaba a tu modo (You thought/That you owned everything/And you used to tell me/The world moved at your will).” The sonero continues:

Y de repente llegué/And suddenly I arrived
Sin echármelas de fiera/Without flaunting as a beast
Y te resultó al revés/And the result was contrary to your will
Porque yo planté bandera/Because I planted flag
Con humildad con mi sencillez/With humility with simplicity
Con facilidad el mensaje aqui/With ease and with that message
Pa’lante!/Onwards!

The song expresses a desire to move forward (pa’lante), to plant a flag as an act of agency. Performed in the recording by sonero Chamaco Ramirez, the song maybe interpreted as claiming the sonero’s authority at a time when salsa, much like reggaeton today, continued to encounter challenges to its legitimacy. As such, the claiming of space narrated in the lyric may gesture beyond personal will and into a challenge to aesthetic conventions. Moreover, “Plánte bandera” simultaneously theorizes and performs Michel De Certeau’s well-known pronouncement that “space is composed of intersections of mobile elements. It is in a sense acted upon by the ensemble of movements deployed within it…” (DeCerteau 1984: 117). In equating the performance of singing to the planting the flag, the song does not only enact a critical valuation of performance as intervention but announces it as a politics of space. The local is here valued as the result of acts, such as singing, which constitute it. The key here is that the sonero’s stance is not based on a policing of formal aesthetics but in the sincerity and affectual approach with which it is performed. His claim of agency results out of a performance of humility, simplicity and ease (humildad, sencillez, facilidad). As well, the local emerges less as a rigid set of boundaries and more as the result of actions/performances that set it in motion. This broader definition of the performance of space is applicable to Calderón’s own engagement with musical appropriation.

Calderón’s version of “Plánte bandera,” retains the salsa idiom as its musical base as sung by Tempo Atomar at the beginning of the track. Calderón follows Atomar and raps over the salsa track, adding his own lyrics after the original refrain to similarly claim his own standing as an MC in contemporary musical practice. He claims: “Lo que yo traigo no se vende en la marqueta/What I bring you cannot find at the market.” He also equates aesthetic difference from his detractors: “Ustedes tienen una rumba distinta a la mia/You have a rumba different from mine.” But much like the original song where the performer marks his attitudinal difference from authority, Calderón questions his addressee’s sincerity in marking their rumba or musical approach as one “De falsedad, vanidad, envidia y (sic.) hipocresía/Of falsities, vanity, jealousy and hypocrisy.” He continues: “Yo traigo lo mio encima, desde la barriga de la negra pilar/bring it in me, from the black woman’s belly.” The gesture here is not to be understood as an essentialist but a historical and geographical one. Calderón ascribes his proficiency to his experience with the black community and performs authenticity in reference to intention rather than technical mastery over the other. His own authenticity is based on an expressed desire to perform blackness with honesty.

Much like the sonero who narrates his struggle to push onwards, Calderón historicizes his own efforts in this song by marking his presence in Puerto Rico’s hip-hop scene since the 1980s and remarking on how he achieved his status “con calma, con la lenta/calmly, slowly.” This slowing down of the process by which the MC arrives at a position of credibility proposes an alternative that interrupts assumptions of hurried, surface engagements with musical practice as a symptom of commercialization and the race to fame often at the heart of evaluations of hip-hop authenticity. Moreover, by insisting on extended time in the development of the MC’s skill Calderón’s theory of performance requires deep in situ engagement with the communities from which the subcultural practices around the genre have emerged. This locational gesture returns us to the language of sincerity. Calderón, and I suggest other reggaeton artists as well, highlight their agency in performance through a documentation of their extended engagement with place. In his interview with Rivera, Calderón argues as much by insisting in a language of sincerity that grounds his practice as local and highlighting the ever-expansive nature of the local by constantly folding in the circuits of influence that constitute it.

Calderón narrates himself through his experiences with labor and cultural performance as both necessary and part of his own progression through the MC’s role. Calderón’s version of “Planté bandera,” retains the salsa idiom as its musical base as sung by Tempo Atomar at the beginning of the track. Calderón follows Atomar and raps over the salsa track, adding his own lyrics after the original refrain to similarly claim his own standing as an MC in contemporary musical practice. He claims: “Lo que yo traigo no se vende en la marqueta/What I bring you cannot find at the market.” He also equates aesthetic difference from his detractors: “Ustedes tienen una rumba distinta a la mia/You have a rumba different from mine.” But much like the original song where the performer marks his attitudinal difference from authority, Calderón questions his addressee’s sincerity in marking their rumba or musical approach as one “De falsedad, vanidad, envidia y (sic.) hipocresía/Of falsities, vanity, jealousy and hypocrisy.” He continues: “Yo traigo lo mio encima, desde la barriga de la negra pilar/bring it in me, from the black woman’s belly.” The gesture here is not to be understood as an essentialist but a historical and geographical one. Calderón ascribes his proficiency to his experience with the black community and performs authenticity in reference to intention rather than technical mastery over the other. His own authenticity is based on an expressed desire to perform blackness with honesty.

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explains that he was actually born in Santurce, moved to Río Grande early in his childhood, grew up in Río Piedras, and moved to Miami with his father on his senior year of high school. However, he also expresses an affinity for the cultural life of Loíza, explaining that he frequented dances and fiestas de santos (celebration of the saints which in santería tradition means the syncretic incorporation of Catholic imagery to Yoruba ritual) with his father (Rivera 2004: 274) and for advances in African-American music cultures from Sugar Hill (Rivera 2004: 278). His narration of self results in a portrait of a subject on the move, constantly negotiating multi-scalar realms of experience but always invested in a performance of intention that makes explicit an interest in durational engagements that might authenticate his particular geographies and/or aesthetic sensibilities. The catalogue of places that emerges in his account does not limit his ability to adamantly claim the local (be it Loíza, black Puerto Rican, or the Puerto Rican migratory experience) as the explicit destination of his practice. The local however refers more to a deep understanding of lived experience, even when textured by mobility, and less an exclusively defined locale. I argue that these investments do not require sanctioning by authoritative measures of experience or aesthetic purity but emerge as expressed intentions in the work of the reggaetón artists themselves.

These investments are made public in a variety of ways. For instance, the diverse musical traditions cited in reggaetón, as Wayne Marshall has so carefully documented, demonstrate the flexibility with which the genre is put together in terms of aesthetic lineage. The MC also performs her/his own legitimizing of a locational discourse in the lyrics and in improvised extra-lyrical flourishes where their lineage—musical, spatial, communitarian—is called forth explicitly. Such instances range from homenajes where the performer pays tribute to a fellow musician or public figure to less formal shout-outs to specific communities or locales. This convention, present both in salsa and in hip-hop, furthers the mission to ground the practice of singing as place making. The evocation of collective identities and collaborative performance is key to an understanding of reggaetón. For example, when the MC signals the DJ, other collaborators in recorded or live performances (see Calderón’s “Loíza” above) s/he shifts the focus from the single-authorship model of celebrity to mark the collective efforts musical performance requires. Lastly, the locational gesture in reggaetón is also made public in a myriad of performance practices from fashion to dance to speech.

Through these performance registers, reggaetón negotiates a cultural landscape that is highly transnational and manages to articulate a complex of influences while also marking a space of its own, announcing a geography that invests in a local that is not blind to the roots and routes from which it has been generated. It is here where the language of sincerity is most useful. In his discussion of racial performances of sincerity, Jackson remarks on sincerity’s investment in ephemerality and partiality as a corrective to authenticity’s sureness and rigidity (14). He explains that sincerity “highlights the ever-fleeting ‘liveness’ of everyday racial performances that cannot be completely captured by authentic mediations of any kind (18).” Durational experiences in place yield an understanding of interpersonal dynamics that allow us to bypass the strict boundaries of judgement for authenticity and introduce a dynamic that most clearly evaluates the intention of individual performances across time. Intention is thus to be measured as the accumulation of performance practices that lead to a body of work rather than a single object of focus. Reggaetón’s performances of sincerity are grounded in acts of localization that privilege live performance, not as a definitional marker for the genre (what is appropriately reggaetón or not) but as a gesture that expresses it’s intention to invest in a fidelity to place (where is reggaetón responsibly grounded at any particular time). While the musical repertoires referenced in the subgenre are expansive and transnational, local cultural articulation is privileged. This prioritization of liveness is also evident in the visual economy of the genre and the musical videos I now turn to.

**Video Killed the Radio Star/Video Saved the Theatre Act: Theatre, Video and Reggaetón’s Geographies**

As demonstrated in the discussion so far, reggaetón’s geographical imaginary is purposely open-ended but strategically localized to both engage with the transnational flow of ideas, styles, techniques and polities but also attend to the immediate needs, experiences, desires, and affects of the communities closest to the genre. But there are yet other less explicit ways in which reggaetón plants its flag, to follow Calderón’s own discourse above. These include the construction of a visual imaginary that similarly articulates the complex and multi-scalar geographies of contemporary Puerto Rican experience.

Most arguments against the artistic quality or authenticity of expression in reggaetón have been leveled through specific attention to its sounds. That is, reggaetón as a cultural practice has been primarily evaluated as a musical phenomenon in its strictest definition and when its broader cultural manifestations have been addressed they have for the most part been labeled as either derivative (such as the assimilation of reggaetón dancing in relation to dancehall), or as indicators of sellout gestures (as in discussions of the theatrical posings of reggaetón stars, the appropriation of swager Suñez so much despises in his article). I wish to turn the discussion in a different direction and ask us to consider reggaetón’s theatricality beyond its sound as a possibly productive site for mining a broader set of relationships enacted within this highly commercialized musical culture.

My investment in the extra-musical performances of reggaetón is not arbitrary. It is founded on a perceived distrust of the visual and performance economies of the subgenre by critics and defenders alike. I want to insist that the broader complex of performance practices in reggaetón tell a different story that an attentive ear alone cannot figure out. In turning to music videos I want to qualify Wayne Marshall’s impression of reggaetón’s move from a “música negra” (black music) to “reggaetón Latino” by suggesting that even within reggaetón’s narrative of mainstreaming, performance strategies remain that insist in marking the genre’s Puerto Ricaness. Marshall has documented convincingly the
visual strategies of recent music videos where a broader Latina/o audience is hailed through images of Latin pride as in N.O.R.E.’s “Oye mi canto” and “(light)brown-skinned, bikini-clad women dancing under giant flags” in Don Omar’s “Reggaeton latino (Marshall 2009: 58-59).” Marshall is an attentive reader of the genre and I agree with his assessment of market trends and the resulting representational dynamics. I am especially aware of the whitening tendencies of the genre as it traverses through commercial territories. He is also aware of more critical articulations in the works of Tego Calderón and Calle 13 and as he closes his essay he appropriately points to their contributions as new directions with much promise. And it is precisely the work of these two artists I wish to highlight at the end of my own discussion. I do so because they evidence a trend within commercial crossover music to insist on locational performances that return reggaetón to a sincere relationship to Puerto Ricanness. Furthermore, I look at these two cases because their exceptional nature may cast a different light on less articulate versions by teaching us to look beyond the surface in order to identify intent, the logics of sincerity, in less explicit cultural performances.

Two recent musical videos, Calle 13’s “La jirafa” and Tego Calderón’s “Tradicional a lo bravo,” have been amply discussed as signaling artistic maturity and sophistication in the genre. Raquel Rivera has remarked in her blog on the surrealistic qualities of Calle 13’s song and video and the innovative genre-crossing aesthetics that bring forth this love ballad into a “reggaetón mix of transnational musical borrowings (Rivera 2006). Promotional media and fan commentaries have similarly remarked on Tego Calderón’s maturity, as well as departure from bomba/plena sampling into more international rhythms, as a sign of development for the genre. In addressing these two projects, critics and fans alike have noted the explicit internationalization evident in the musical borrowings enacted in both pieces: Brazilian percussion in “La jirafa” and Venezuelan merengue and Colombian vallenato in “Tradicional a lo bravo.” These rhythmical expansions or pushes may be understood as part of the pan-Latino or Latin American reach identified by Quintero Rivera (2007). Baez (2006) and Marshall (2009) in their analysis of reggaetón. This similarly expanded repertoire is but one of many similarities between the two songs. They were both promoted widely through the circulation of a musical video in advance of the record’s release. Both videos were produced by Puerto Rico-based creative media collective Rojo Chiringa and directed by theatre and film actor Israel Lugo with visual concepts developed by mask performance artist Deborah Hunt.

Rojo Chiringa, an innovative group of artists in the performing and visual arts, has been active in the Puerto Rican commercial media and event planning (including musical concerts) and independent cinema scene since 2005. The company’s promotional materials state from the outset their translocal interests. The introductory narrative to the collective’s website reads: “We are a young company with an interest in developing artistic projects of great quality that contribute to the cultural and economic scene, locally and internationally.” And it is precisely a combination of commercially driven projects that has allowed them to finance more artistically and politically robust ventures into documentary filmmaking. The company collective has been rather successful over the past years achieving various nominations from the Latin Grammies and an award for their music video for Calle 13’s hit “Atrévete-te-te” (2006). As well, they have secured placement for their documentary and short films at international film festivals. But what is most germane to their engagement with reggaetón is their explicit incorporation of Puerto Rican and international artists, into their ventures. This strategic incorporation of the local art scene into commercially produced media may suggest a strategic navigation through mainstream commercial interests and aesthetics in the Island’s impressively active media scene. While some readers may object to such a hopeful reading arguing against the pitfalls of commercial co-optation that echo Sunez’s own objections to reggaetón as a musical subgenre, I see this partnership between Rojo Chiringa, reggaetón artists, and the myriad of local visual arts collaborations brought into the fold in their media productions as an investment in marking the local from an acknowledged globalized position. This locational practice does not guarantee the actual political leanings of the genre but points to a strategic traversing of commercial and subcultural geographies in Puerto Rican culture.

“La jirafa” was released at a time when the public conversation about reggaetón in the international media tended to wonder about the future of the genre as radio stations originally unveiled as fully dedicated to a reggaetón format, such as 95.1 Latino Vibe station in Phoenix, began to contemplate shifting directions back to a mixture of pop, rock en español, and Latina/o hip-hop. These changes, largely justified by the limited sales profile of the reggaetón format as a global crossover, led critics across the land to declare reggaetón a dying fad. Calle 13’s gain in visibility at the time and their incorporation of an international sound into their productions offered glimmers of hope to an industry obsessed with gaining as broad a market appeal as possible without necessarily attending to local needs.

Calle 13’s song moves away from the basic dembow rhythmic base but introduces a softer 3:2 polyrhythmic pattern that maintains an emphasis on the percussive aesthetics of the genre. The MC’s delivery is equally softened as Residente’s declaration maintains the rhythmically spoken quality of reggaetón but is accompanied by a chanting chorus that pushes the vocal register further into a global roots aesthetic. “La jirafa” is a heterosexual love ballad in its lyrics, showcasing a flirtatious appreciation and courtship of a female companion in masterfully poetic language that weaves the quotidian with the elevated seamlessly. The in-your-face sexuality of the genre is here exchanged for a gentlemanly advance that drastically recasts much of reggaetón’s explicit chauvinism. These departures from convention were variously celebrated as innovative expansion of the musical language and reach of reggaetón and also as a step towards mainstreaming into international markets.

At first sight the video supports a narrative of mainstreaming with its international hipster aesthetics and non-descript geographies. The video is shot in an outdoor setting in an arid landscape of dry grass hills and cacti and a lonely road. None of the urban locational markers of reggaetón appear in this video. Gone is the urban neighborhood scene or the concert stage so often cited in reggaetón’s visual library as well as other explicit markers of ethnic or national geography such as the flags or the MC’s shout-outs to particular communities. But the video invites a focus on a visual economy as a
drummer marching along a paved road with his striking of the drum synchronizing with the bass drum in the track. The shot cuts immediately on the beat to a close-up of a hand drawing the drummer on a sketch pad. Another beat and the image pulls back from the single drummer to reveal three musicians walking together along the lonely road. As a full body shot of three musicians marching across the landscape pulls back we return to the image of the hand, the woman’s hand, sketching the vast open landscape that is the background to this video. This simple gesture exposes the labor behind the fictions of the music video and alerts the viewer of the constructed nature of visual vocabularies. Imaging musicians in the act of drawing points to the perspectival labor of the camera in the video and to the history of proximity between the visual and the aural in popular music. John Mundy (1999: 21-23) has remarked that the relationship between popular music and visual technologies (film and television) where already established in England and the United States. This relationship set-up a dynamic whereby popular music marketing was attached to the construction of visual celebrity and vice versa. The marking of the “visual economy of music,” as Mundy terms it, serves as a gateway into a more critical approach to the means of productions in videos such as a “La jirafa” where mainstream commercial efforts are paired with an investment in local artistic practices. Theatre, and performance more broadly conceived, emerges as an alternative economy that localizes reggaetón’s internationalist drive.

Much like the technologies of imaging highlighted in this video, theatre is featured in tender images where Residente, Calle 13’s vocalist, is shown performing to his love object via a puppet. The ventriloquist dummy, recalling the aesthetic conventions of vaudeville and their popularization in Hollywood by performers such as Edgar Bergen, adds to the art film aura of the video while extending the investments in live performance announced with the opening marching of the drummers performing the rooted percussive patterns that propel this reggaetón variation forward. “La jirafa” also positions live performance as intermediary to the interpersonal transactions showcased on the screen as the couples exchange with each other to the background of the musician’s labor, through the creative ventures into imagining them and the landscape that surrounds them on paper, and through the ventriloquist dependence on the puppet to amplify or affectively charge the MC’s declarations to his beloved. But most importantly, theatre may be present in this video as an index of social relations in creative practices around reggaetón that ghost traditions of performance practice not exclusive to the current narratives of the genre.

“La jirafa” showcases a third protagonist throughout the video. While the couple remains the narrative center of the piece, as it is the primary relationship addressed in the song, a character in a bird’s mask and tailcoat suit constantly interrupts the diegesis of the love story. Following the couple and demanding the attention of the extensions that seek to embrace, perhaps bless the couple, and dancing about the video in carnivalesque anthropomorphizations, the bird character points to an elsewhere in the visual markers of the video that I suggest counteract the anywhere of most of its iconic elements.

The bird mask featured in the video was designed by Deborah Hunt, a Puerto Rico-based experimental mask theatre and puppet artist. Originally from New Zealand, Hunt has resided and actively practiced her craft in Puerto Rico for over a decade, arriving in the Island after tours throughout Latin America and Europe and remains active in international circuits for the performing arts where she is frequently featured in residencies and workshops. As theatre scholar Lower Fiet has observed, Hunt “presents a lyrical narrative illustrated as much by the mythical and mysterious elements of an ancient world as by the quotidian rituals of everyday life of any era (1999:352).” Her work aspires to a universal connection of common experiences and thus oftentimes relies on the abstraction made possible by the mask or the puppet to generalize her thematic explorations, often achieving a strategic no-place exclusive to the theatrical. This level of detachment from a locational grounding may be easily argued as part of the increasing popularity of visual codes prevalent in contemporary MTV/H1 video production. In fact, as Marisol Lebrón has observed in discussion of Calle 13’s most recent video, “Electro movimiento,” the group may be “following a trend that we’re seeing more and more in reggaetón and beginning to see pop up more in mainstream hip hop videos of hipster aesthetics (2009).” However, in “La jirafa,” Hunt’s aesthetic imprint points in a different direction. The bird character appears as the single visual marker of the particular outside of the image of Residente as a recognizable element of the video. The particular here is not represented through an authentic point of reference or an explicit locational gesture on the part of the MC, although we may understand his use of language and his accent as strong markings of the Puerto Ricaness of his performance. Instead, the local appears in the visual haunting of the masked character and its ability to make visible the collaborative labor of producing contemporary popular culture in the Island. This move is especially significant since it attempts to signal the local through a recurrence to prior performance events within Puerto Rican culture without necessarily forcing it into the folklorizing logic that has so much characterized the institutionalization of state supported artistic practices in the Island from crafts to theatre.

Hunt’s masked character does not make its inaugural appearance in this video. In fact it has appeared many times before in live contexts ranging from Las aventuras de los jóvenes dioses (2000). Hunt’s adaptation of Eduardo Galeano’s version of the Quiché/Maya book of creation (Popol vuh), to Cloche y el cuervo (2002), a story of an ordinary everyman traversing through the world and encountering the evil intentions of the Crow character who attempts to derail him into failure. The character of the bird is thus a re-performance, recognizable perhaps to just a few audience members who have encountered Hunt’s work in Parques públicos (Las aventuras was performed at the Antonia Quiñones Park in the Condado area of San Juan), but indexing a history of activity that is local to Puerto Rico’s recent theatrical history. I believe that this shout-out, akin the sonoro’s or the MC’s acknowledgment of her DJ or her audience, understands what theatre and performance scholar Marvin Carlson has remarked as the haunting dynamics of the stage. He explains:

Everything in the theatre, the bodies, the materials utilized, the language, the space itself, is now and has always been haunted, and that haunting has been an essential part of the theatre’s meaning to and reception by its audiences in all times and all places (Carlson 2003:15).
national authenticity or commercially oriented productions in Puerto Rico’s theatre scene.\[^{[13]}\] Hunt’s incorporation into the visual economy of reggaetón may perform a similar negotiation, as Lowell Fiet has observed contemporary theatre practitioners in the Island, including Hunt, engage in resisting the commercially driven or institutionally sanctioned homogenization of production aesthetics in favor of “rooting” them in “the geopolitical context and cultural specificities of Puerto Rican historical and contemporary experience” (Fiet 2004: 20). These specificities are transnational in nature, allowing the artist from New York to stand in for the figure of the local and a mapping of the relations out of which contemporary “rootings” emerge. It is Hunt’s durational engagement with Puerto Rican theatrical culture that allows for her to be understood as sincerely local. And it is precisely in this gesture to redefine how Puerto Ricaness is envisioned where I believe live performance and its ghostings stand center stage. Here local artistic practice (theatre) is signifyed within the globalized musical market similar to the ways Calderón argues he incorporates live performance experiences from bomba and fiestas de santos to salsa and hip-hop into his aesthetic mix.

In closing I want to turn briefly to Tego Calderón’s video “Tradicional a lo bravo” because I believe it similarly articulates the local in a flirtatious engagement with the theatrical. This video, like “La jirafa,” focuses on the flirtatious courtship of a heterosexual couple. Set in a Santurce[4][14] bar that harks back to 1940s simplicity in architecture and design, the video focuses on the figure of a Black woman dressed seductively in a short red dress. She is the object of Calderón’s advances in the song’s lyrics and is approached physically by a male dancer who flirts with her throughout the video. Tradition, as the title of the song suggests, is referenced in the lyrics as the social dynamic of flirting as well as the musical citations of the piece (where a Latin-American Afro-beat becomes the stand-in for more specifically national definitions). Visually, tradition is manifest through images of the “typical” working class bar and the cast of popular characters that inhabit it (all played by Calderón). Deborah Hunt provides additional visual material to the video in the form of colorful flat cut-out and shadow puppets that stand-in for the woman and her pretendor, at times transformed into a horse that references the “mounting” which is the driving metaphor to sex in the song’s lyrics. The cutout figures become interchangeable with the dancing characters as the camera cuts from human to the puppets and to Calderón in his various disguises repeatedly.

Hunt’s visual language, much as was the case in “La jirafa,” interrupts the diegesis of the scene with artificial substitutions in the form of shadows. The back and forth between human and image literalize the relationship between reggaetón an the aesthetic and the broader set of relationships and negotiations that shape it as a genre. The shadow ghosts the human suggesting perhaps that its true nature is only to be found in representation, prior performances that constitute it in citation. The theatrical techniques cited in Hunt’s shadow puppetry thus point to relations on the ground not always acknowledged in evaluations of reggaetón. These relationships may further advance a notion of blackness as the shadow or ghost of Calderón’s performances that echo with his own musical incorporations of traditional music. If Hunt’s localizing aesthetic calls forth a history of labor to represent with the ancient techniques of shadow puppetry as tool, Calderón’s incursions into reggaetón and his complexly citational practices may be understood as equally ghosted by a tradition of black music that indexes a broader web of material relations. The conversation established visually in this piece may remain at a time when the media was marking Calderón’s musical departure from those borrowings in narratives of mainstream commercialism. But such an investment in the local, I must insist again, emerges out of hybrid practices that understand the transnational nature of its roots and the continued internalization of its routes. As such, reggaetón must insist in encountering its ghosts, not by ossifying its vision of the local in rigid aesthetic programs, but insisting in deep engagements that make the social relations behind the music apparent. This is the promise of reggaetón’s trans(actions).

I am aware that the performance agencies I identify in the music videos discussed above may at best be politically tenuous. These two courtship songs and their accompanying visuals certainly do not articulate an explicit political platform about the local, much less about race, gender or sexuality. Furthermore, the reader more accustomed to grand narratives of resistance in cultural analysis might look down at the mild representational challenges evidenced in these two examples. The assumption of alternative aesthetics in the development of commercial popular culture is in fact at the heart of the history of appropriation Sunez and others seek to expose and resist in their critiques of reggaetón. Additionally, as scholars like Susan Bordo (1995) have remarked, oppositional readings of popular cultural texts often fail to acknowledge the normalizing ideologies reified in these enactments. I see these normalizing tendencies circulating in reggaetón’s gender dynamics and its cult of commercialism in conjunction with its insistence in local rearticulation. In fact, the very image of the Black woman as object of desire in “Tradicional a lo bravo” traffics in a long history, local and global, of racist and sexist representations of the mulata as subservient and available for visual consumption and more.[5][15]

While the cultural practices of reggaetón activate representational repertoires of a conflicted political nature which may or may not ameliorate the effects of historical power imbalances, they also open up avenues for local use (even in recorded format) whereby alternatives may arise. This is perhaps where an engagement with sincerity is most promising. Attempting to the affordances of particular players in the cultural realm. In doing so, criticism reorients itself away from touting claims over the others’ territory of forms or good or bad politics. Venturing into the realm of sincerity asks of the reader not to dismiss the disciplinary and hegemonic currents of commercial popular culture but to look at other grostes, ghostings if you will, that open up possibilities for consuming and participating in the public sphere in compromised but simultaneously productively strategic configurations. Perhaps musical cultures offer ideal examples from where to rehearse an analysis focused on sincerity as the centers of activity are so multiply available in recorded and live formats, in participatory engagements that allow consumers as co-producers to sing along, dance, assume the visual and gestural repertoires of a particular song or video. The complexities of cultural co-production between artists, marketeers, financiers sources, and their intended or unintended publics result in a palimpsest of cultural and political agencies that a rigidly
emerge from within these cultural performances. It is fueled by this hope that I insist in the need to acknowledge the cultural practices of reggaetón as important and contested venues and strategies for Latinos and more specifically Puerto Ricans—*de aquí, de allá y de flujo constante*—to engage in the public life of the United States and Puerto Rico. I doing so I am invested in identifying and archiving relationships in creative labor that generally go unremarked and that tell a different story of the cultural dynamics behind musical productions like reggaetón. I do not suggest that Calle 13 or Tego Calderón solve these tensions or that they are the only ones whose artistic practice offer productive complexities but they are a start in what I hope will be an investment in future readings of reggaetón and Latina/o popular culture in general that seeks to articulate the local beyond the traps of authenticity.

Notes

[1] I thank Victoria Fortuna, my research assistant and doctoral advisee at Northwestern University, for her assistance with this piece. Without her careful exploration of reggaetón's archive and her thorough fact-checking of my claims this research would not have been possible.

[2] In looking at web-publications and blog activity on reggaetón I seek to highlight the increasingly central position of on-line media in the production, dissemination, and critique of popular culture. See Raquel Rivera's "Reggaeton, Gender, Blogging and Pedagogy" for another example of blogging as a tool in teaching about Latina/o hip-hop and reggaetón.

[3] In discussing the phonocentric treatment of reggaetón I refer to the almost exclusive attention to sound as the object of most musicostructural analysis as well as in popular discussions of the genre. In doing so I draw from Jacques Derrida's now famous discussion of phonocentrism in *Of Grammatology*.


[7] Johnson's theory of appropriation is not to be confused with Judith Butler's theorization of the performative. For a clearly articulated distancing from the performativity project see Johnson's "'Quare' Studies, of (Almost) Everything I Know About Queer Studies I Learned from My Grandmother."


[9] There is clearly a tendency in reggaetón, as in hip-hop, towards narratives of struggle that invest in the experience of the underdog. While a critical impulse might lead us to traditional narratives of meritocracy or the "American Dream" I wish to resist such an approach as I believe success in many of these songs, "Planté bandera" amongst them, remains circumscribed to a position of marginality so that the flaunting before an audience may not always allow a top down perspective.


[14] Santurce is a district within the San Juan municipality of Puerto Rico.


References


