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Reggaeton and Female Narratives

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Reggaeton and Female Narratives

Abstract

Reggaeton has become a cultural factor all throughout Latin America and among the Latino population in the United States. Reggaeton is now a Latino music phenomenon that has become part of the mainstream not only in Latin American countries but also in the United States; many American artists such as Drake, Cardi B, Nicki Minaj, and Will Smith are collaborating with reggaeton artists such as J-Balvin, Bad Bunny, Ozuna, and others. Therefore, although most reggaeton artists come from Puerto Rico, reggaeton has established a visible presence in the Latino community in the United States where it has become prominent in the pop culture mainstream and as a result, reggaeton is attributed to Latino culture. The attractiveness of reggaeton lies with its hybrid identity, meaning that the origins of reggaeton reflect the interaction of people all through the Caribbean (LeBron 220). Incorporating neo-African, Caribbean and Latino influences, reggaeton is characterized by vocals that are similar to rap and dancehall, along with a steady rhythm called dembow (Rivera 222-223).

Keywords

Reggaeton, women, machismo, Latin America

Disciplines

African American Studies | Latin American Languages and Societies | Latina/o Studies | Music

Comments

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Reggaeton and Female Narratives

Introduction:

Reggaeton has become a cultural factor all throughout Latin America and among the Latino population in the United States. Reggaeton is now a Latino music phenomenon that has become part of the mainstream not only in Latin American countries but also in the United States; many American artists such as Drake, Cardi B, Nicki Minaj, and Will Smith are collaborating with reggaeton artists such as J-Balvin, Bad Bunny, Ozuna, and others. Therefore, although most reggaeton artists come from Puerto Rico, reggaeton has established a visible presence in the Latino community in the United States where it has become prominent in the pop culture mainstream and as a result, reggaeton is attributed to Latino culture. The attractiveness of reggaeton lies with its hybrid identity, meaning that the origins of reggaeton reflect the interaction of people all through the Caribbean (LeBron 220). Incorporating neo-African, Caribbean and Latino influences, reggaeton is characterized by vocals that are similar to rap and dancehall, along with a steady rhythm called *dembow* (Rivera 222-223).

Reggaeton is complex because it presents narratives of people who have been voiceless. Within those groups, however, reggaeton becomes weaponized by a male oriented narrative that perpetuates the marginalization of women. On the one hand, reggaeton presents a narrative that has been shaped by the interaction of people of color who have undergone forces of colonialism, imperialism, and migration (LeBron 224). On the other hand, reggaeton has also built a narrative

of male superiority that centers around the hyper-masculine identity, called machismo (Lopez 528). Machismo is part of Latino cultural identity; it is embedded and prevalent throughout Latin American countries; machismo is a male attribute that is expected from Latino men. As a result, reggaeton is characterized to be the narrative of Latino men who have created spaces within their music to express themselves; nevertheless, reggaetoneros have uplifted their sense of superiority through perpetuating the degradation and objectification of Latina women (Moreno 256). This is extremely problematic since such narrative has become the dominant narrative, the single story that not only degrades, objectifies and, as a result, hypersexualizes Latinas but also normalizes the struggles that they face as women of color, due to their intersection of race and gender (Baez 67).

The Narratives of Reggaeton:

The dominant narratives of reggaeton which are depicted through the lenses of machismo contribute not only to how popular culture views Latinas but also to how Latinas have internalized such perceptions to view themselves. Many Latinas have de-constructed the machista narrative of reggaeton by creating spaces in an urban music platform that initially left no space for Latina women to redefine their gender roles; due to reggaeton's hyper-masculine identity, women have chosen to establish and uphold their own narrative that centers around the reclaiming of their bodies and sexuality (Baez 70-71). Such Latinas have risen in the form of reggaetoneras, such as Ivy Queen who has established a third space through her music to voice gender inequalities which challenge the male narrative behind reggaeton (Vasquez 305).

Although reggaeton contains this machismo narrative, it should not be considered monolithic (Vazquez 306) because it is a genre of constant struggles, dialogue, movement and change (Rivera 73-75). Therefore, reggaeton can be weaponized to perpetuate and normalize the

struggles of Latina women through their degradation, objectification, and hyper-sexualization that feeds a sense of male superiority and leads to a misogynistic mindset. At the same time, it can be used as a platform for the untold narratives to establish a social justice voice that addresses their struggles; Ivy Queen has generated a third space in her music to address intertwined systems of oppression that target their intersectionality, which interconnects with identity. For example, Ivy Queen has questioned and called out male voices that profit from exploiting female sexuality in the content of their music and music videos (Rivera 67-70).

History of Reggaeton:

Reggaeton is a fusion of dancehall reggae and rap, with salsa, merengue, and bomba influences, which are forms of Latin American, Caribbean and African American music influences. It originated primarily from marginalized communities, especially from black working-class origins. Reggaeton is the exchange of cultural interaction between Puerto Ricans on the island and Puerto Ricans on the mainland as well as among other Latinos and Caribbeans. As a result, reggaeton has become not only a central cultural factor in Puerto Rico where it is the biggest producer of the urban genre, but also a powerful cultural symbol of Latinidad (Baez 64-65). Reggaeton contains a hybrid identity, meaning that the origins of reggaeton are a reflection of the interaction of people all through the Caribbean (LeBron 220-224). Reggaeton traces its roots to Jamaica, Panama, Puerto Rico, and New York. By the early 1900s, Panama's population constituted descendants of Hispanic Spaniards, Native Panamanians, and Afro-Panamanians. Since the 1820's due to the Panama Canal's construction, there was an influx of groups of Caribbean immigrants coming into the country for employment opportunities. During the construction of the canal, Panamanians and immigrants dealt with various forms of discrimination and racism by the hands of the United States through the implications of racially

segregated policies. As a result, Caribbean immigrants articulated a counter-argument through the power of music that centered around their shared common heritages (which are based on a neo-African identity) which allowed the integration of different styles of music. During the 1960s, the Movimiento Afro-Panameno was founded and established by Walter Smith in order to promote the awareness and acceptance of Panamanian Blackness and its relation to the diaspora. This led in the 1970s to the infusion of Colombian cumbia, Trinidadian soca, Jamaican reggae, calypso, and Haitian kompa to create Latin American reggae in which the descendants from Jamaican immigrants, who were bilingual in both Spanish and Jamaican Patois, started bending Jamaican reggae into a Spanish version by translating the lyrics of Jamaican reggae into Spanish and singing them over the original melodies, a form termed *reggae en español* (Samponaro 490). Eventually, Latin American reggae incorporated salsa, funk, R&B, and hip-hop. By the 1980s, Latin American reggae incorporated Jamaican dancehall rap. Therefore, reggaeton was developed officially in the 1980s into an urban genre which consisted of a mixture of reggae, hip-hop, and tropical flows. By the 1990s through El General's (Edgardo Franco) "Tu Pum Pum" by establishing rap in English and Spanish over dancehall rhythms, Panamanian reggaeton was spread all throughout the Caribbean, especially in Puerto Rico. Reggae en español soon became a sensation in Puerto Rico where artists such as Vico C had already established Spanish language rap (Samponaro 491). In 1991 the *Dew Bow* beat became adopted as the basic beat, and by the late 1990s, it became what we know as reggaeton (Manuel 113-114). Due to Puerto Rico's ties with the mainland reggaeton was introduced to Puerto Ricans in the United States. However, Panamanian reggaeton failed to be established as a transnational music genre due to the initial skepticism that it was an unoriginal urban genre. Nevertheless, reggaeton from Puerto Rico was and still is considered the authentic representation of the genre due to its commercial success;

during the early 2000s through Hector and Tito's *La Reconquista* album, reggaeton came to be considered a transnational phenomenon. Therefore, through the promotion efforts of Universal Music & Video Distribution, *La Reconquista* helped reggaeton to be brought from "underground" into the mainstream (Samponaro 492).

Machismo and Reggaeton:

The objectification of female bodies has been necessary for the masculine status to be obtained and maintained. Female bodies are seen as objects of pleasure rather than as the human beings behind them. This is due in part to males' tendency to use the female body as a way to prove their masculinity, upholding the mindset that they have a given power that only they are able to create, embrace and cultivate with other males. This is problematic since the objectification of women's bodies leads to the perpetuation of misogynistic behavior. Males perceive that they must prove their masculine status by not only utilizing women but also by degrading them. As a result, the sense of masculinity is fed and upheld by the oppression of women. In regards to the toxic, hypermasculinity that is embedded in the machismo culture among Latino men, they are forced to come into age by acquiring the toxic masculinity; therefore, despite the fact that their voice is the dominant narrative of the Latino culture, they have never had a space in which they are allowed to freely discover themselves and their complex aspects without centering around their masculine identity (Bishop, "Making a Man"). As a result, reggaeton provides a space for Latino men to express themselves and articulate their feelings; however, such expressions are allowed only if they hide behind the wall of sexism as a way to make such vulnerable expressions (vulnerability is a threat to toxic masculinity; therefore, in the machismo culture there is no room for that) but still be considered a man in the eyes of machismo culture (Morgan 597). Reggaeton is used as a medium by Latino men to

articulate and process their marginalization (a form of storytelling of what is happening in the barrio), and as a result, these “powerful powerless men” (Bishop, “Making a Man”), once they step into the transnational platform that is this urban genre, finally have a sense of control over their own narratives even if it is at the expense of defining and distorting Latina women’s narratives. Reggaeton is globally capitalizing and profiting out of the objectification of women’s bodies and in regards to homophobia and sexism in its narratives (Samponaro 498).

Reggaetoneros tend to express their masculinity by enforcing a sense of dominance over women; in “oye mi canto” by N.O.R.E. featuring Daddy Yankee, Nina Sky, Gem Star and Big Mato, ironically the narrative is about Latino pride while at the same time the male voices are stating the ideal physical qualities of the women of each Latin America country especially by mainly focusing on the sizes of Latina women’s butts. Nina Sky (which is a duo of twin sisters) takes the chorus by just stating “boricua, morena, dominicana, colombiana” as a way to represent the voices of Latina women by approving their own objectification. The reggaetoneros also voice what they will give Latinas in regards to sexual pleasures by only assuming what they want and not asking for what they want. The few reggaetoneras that are able to make it into the mainstream of reggaeton usually are presented as a submissive, hyper-sexualized voice in the chorus which is weaponized to reinforce the male-centered narrative through taming and reigning over their defiant, aggressive attitude (Samponaro 498). In Hector y Tito featuring Don Omar’s “baila morena,” the reggaetonera Glory’s only part is for a portion of the chorus in which she engages in a call and response relationship with Tito where he says “baila morena, baila morena, perro pa los nenes perro pa las nenas” and she responds “dale moreno que nos fuimos fuegote.” Throughout the song the male voices are hypersexualizing *la morena* by stating all the sexual fantasies that they want to do with her. Also, they describe *la morena* as a woman who is

out of control and needs a *moreno* to calm her down. By stating “dale moreno, no pares moreno” Gaby is reassuring the moreno that she wants to be tamed by him and that he should not stop.

Female Response; the Counter-Narrative:

Women of color tend to be at the intersection of race and gender, meaning that they are exposed to various levels of systematic oppression that are intertwined and extremely embedded and normalized. As a result, women of color have to face marginalization not only from white men but also from white women, and most importantly from their own men of color (Morgan 597). This leads feminist of color to point out the intersectionality of their identities by identifying how the forms of differences in regards to their identity aspects overlap (race, nation, gender, class, and sexuality) (Anzaldua). Therefore, women of color, especially focusing on Latinas, should be analyzed through the lenses of transnational feminism, meaning that their experiences and identities are not monolithic but rather complex, compelling and contradictory (facets of identity may be in competition with one another) (Baez 67). As a result, Latinas who are creating spaces in reggaeton to challenge and re-define their sense of womanhood (Morgan 629) should not be derogated because they are offering a platform (which was initially intended to leave no room to de-construct gender roles) where a young Latina can adopt a counter-feminist argument (without necessarily identifying as a feminist) to articulate their own narrative and voice in simple forms that are more accessible, applicable and inclusive to all types of women of color (Morgan 538). The hybridity behind Latinas' identities that center around a juxta-positioned nature (due to their identity aspects being forms of differences they are constantly in opposition despite their intersection) results in the constant process of making and re-making themselves (Baez 66-57). Therefore, reggetoneras such as Ivy Queen implement the

hybridity and transnational dynamics to navigate a space that is dominated by a male-oriented narrative that is reggaeton.

Ivy Queen's intersectionality as a woman of color must be understood on the basis of her complex, hybrid subjectivity, meaning that her forms of differences in regards to her identity aspects overlap at the same time that they also compete and counteract with each other (Baez 75); being an artist in a male-dominated genre (which profits out of her marginalization), at the same time she is articulating her counter-feminist argument against machismo narratives in the industry. Therefore, Ivy Queen is constricted by structural forces within reggaeton; nevertheless, she constantly attempts to assert her agency through the choices she makes in her music by centering around female empowerment (Vasquez 305). In Ivy Queen's first song, "Somos raperos pero no delincuentes," she is responding to the stigma and criminalization of the underground urban gender in Puerto Rico (Baez 68). This shows how women of color are willing to commit and take upon themselves the struggles of their brothers, men of color (in this case reggaetoneros); however, men of color are not willing to do the same for their sisters (reggaetoneros are still going to profit from the marginalization of Latinas) (Morgan 567). Through the title of her first album, *En mi imperio*, Ivy Queen claims a sense of belonging (which is different than being welcome) in reggaeton even though it is a male dominated genre which shows the claiming of space and the establishment of a presence in a genre that was not made for her. Ivy Queen establishes a feminist intervention where she embodies an "undomestic female sexuality" (Cooper) that does not conform to normative femininity and calls for female sexual agency in the form of dancing (Baez 70-71). In Ivy Queen's "Yo quiero bailar" she addresses the power of dancing as an alternative space to exercise sexual agency (Cooper) where she challenges the virgin/whore/dichotomy by emphasizing that women has the liberty to

express their sexual agency through dancing, but that does not mean that they are for male pleasure (they are not going to sleep with their dance partner) and that they can still be respected (Baez 72). The embracement of the sexual agency through the act of dancing can be also reflected by perreo which the signature dance of reggaeton is. Perreo is a form of grinding dancing in which the man takes the position of a male dog and the women the position of a female dog (which resembles their sexual intercourse). However, perreo has been condemned as a pornographic act; nevertheless, this stigma imposes decency by policing a woman's body. Although perreo is viewed as a vulgar act, it is a form of sexual agency in which women are taking control of their bodies (Baez 64-65). The criticism behind Ivy Queen focuses on her recent looks. At the beginning of her career, she was accused of being too *bucha* (macha) due to her baggy style of clothing and “masculine” rapping voice (which signified that she was not for male consumption); this led to the questioning of her sexuality (women who are transgressive are assumed in urban music to be lesbian or bisexual); nevertheless, she is now being criticized for hyper-feminizing her look. In response to the criticism, Ivy Queen has emphasized the construction of herself as an agent of new self, through which she makes changes to her image not based on fitting gender standards but rather as a representation of her growth as a person and an artist (this demonstrates the complexity of her character by navigating the dynamics of the two different images) (Baez 72). Ivy Queen has established forms of resistance through the power of names, referring to herself as *la gata*, *la perra*, *la potra* which are derogatory terms, to reappropriate negative connotations that have been imposed on women by men (as a means to uphold masculine status) by redefining such connotations and turning them into female empowerment (Vazquez 306).

Reggaeton is a complex music genre that it should not only be considered a misogynistic and sexist urban platform despite the fact that its dominant narrative and voice are centered around a hyper-masculine identity (Baez 72); rather reggaeton contains hybrid and transnational aspects that articulate the narratives of people of color throughout the Americas that have encountered different levels of marginalization (LeBron 224). Therefore, despite the intention of creating such space for Latino men and Latino men only to voice their experiences and convey their feelings (behind the wall of sexism to be accepted by machismo ideals) (Morgan 597), Latina women have deconstructed and challenged the dominant narrative (the machismo voices of Latino men) by claiming reggaeton as their space also, developing a counter narrative where they embrace their sexual agency through the form of dancing and using the power of musical lyrics to re-appropriate degradation terms as a means of empowerment (Baez 64-72) .

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