CONSTRUCTING VERNACULAR CULTURE IN THE TRANS-CARIBBEAN

Edited by HOLGER HENKE and KARL-HEINZ MAGISTER

Caribbean Studies

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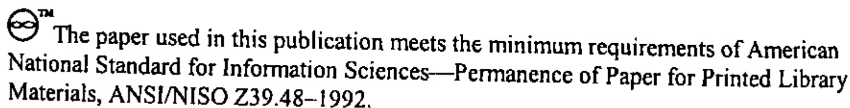

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Raphael Dalleo

Readings from Aquí y Allá: Music, Commercialism, and the Latino-Caribbean Transnational Imaginary

Like any epochal shift, the passage in the Caribbean from colonialism to postcoloniality has been fraught with contradictions and complications.[1] This essay will look at two texts from a pivotal moment in this history: the album *Siembra*, released in 1978 as one of the first and most successful collaborations of Panamanian *salsero* Rubén Blades and Nuyorican bandleader Willie Colón; and a novel published two years earlier, *La guaracha del Macho Camacho* by Puerto Rican author Luis Rafael Sánchez. Reading these texts together will allow a close examination of the 1970s as part of the passage in the Caribbean from the colonial framework of binary separation and hierarchy to a postcoloniality defined by globalization as political, economic, and cultural interpenetration on a new scale. This decade marks a particularly important moment of shift and flux in the Caribbean, from the possibilities promised by the liberation struggles against European colonialism to the realities of a U.S.-dominated postcoloniality. Looking at the 1970s also allows us to see how this political and social transition has coincided with a cultural one: just as literature was finding its role in the public sphere in question, the decade witnessed the golden age of salsa with socially engaged performers like Héctor Lavoe, Rubén Blades and Willie Colón and the rise of reggae in both local Jamaican politics and the imagining of an international black diaspora.[2]

It is within the context of these shifting priorities that contemporary music and literature from the Caribbean must be discussed. In a European colonial system which privileged high culture, anticolonial writers like José Martí, C. L. R. James, and Aimé Césaire sought to inhabit the written word as a cultural weapon in the battles for decolonization.[3] Postcoloniality has brought an uncertainty about that system of values; as a result, we see an increased movement into cultural studies for Caribbean writers and critics alike, as popular culture forms, and music in particular, become the sites for intellectuals to channel the

utopian aspirations once invested in the literature. The field of cultural studies follows the attempts made in *testimonio* and dub poetry to turn to popular culture as the last authentic repository of Caribbean identity in the face of cultural imperialism, at precisely the moment in which international culture industries have become dominant in the production and circulation of visual and aural forms.[4] The rise of Caribbean cultural studies, as a postcolonial response to the unfulfilled promises of anticolonialism, is part of the context for the interventions of Blades, Colón and Sánchez.

After establishing the critical move away from literature and towards cultural studies, the essay will turn to two major texts from the Caribbean and its diaspora that both thematize and illustrate elements of a residual anticolonial and emergent postcolonial world. Listening to and reading *Siembra* and *La guaracha del Macho Camacho*, one crafted in New York and the other in San Juan, will allow us to trace out the contours of the cultural exchanges between Puerto Rico and its U.S. diaspora, affirming and interrogating a transnational understanding of cultural identity. This essay presents readings along the axis of what Lisa Sánchez González calls the "p'acá y p'allá dialectics" of Caribbean transnationalism, the shifting space not coinciding precisely with the territory or culture of either the United States or the "Other America" but existing in both, in between both, and in the movement between both.[5] Putting these two texts into dialogue shows how they speak directly to the contradictions and paradoxes of postcolonial Caribbean cultural production, addressing in particular how the contemporary intellectual move into popular culture displays simultaneously the desires to move past and to reconstitute the utopian horizons of the anticolonial project. This chapter will show how Blades and Colón, in the song "Plástico," and Sánchez, in *La guaracha del Macho Camacho*, draw on this nostalgia for the anticolonial even as they attempt to imagine new functions for cultural products in the postcolonial marketplace and new roles for the committed artist in contemporary Caribbean society.

The forms and content of postcolonial cultural products such as "Plástico" and *La guaracha del Macho Camacho* can be best understood within the context of a postcolonial literary field in which the value of the written word can no longer be taken for granted. This movement, from literary criticism to a criticism centered around music and popular culture, begins to be seen in the 1970s in the work of influential literary critics such as Gordon Rohlehr. Rohlehr emerged as a major authority on West Indian literature during the "*Savacou* debate" of the early 1970s, in a series of essays about the nature of West Indian poetry and the relationship of literature to orality and the subaltern folk.[6] His work directly engages the question of what the passage from the colonial to the postcolonial means for Caribbean cultural production. He describes his collected writings from the 1970s and 1980s as "concerned with the relationship between upheaval and making, the vortex of old worlds going out of and the turmoil of new worlds coming into existence"; that is, the unfulfilled promises of West Indian independence.[7] In the two volumes of his collected essays, Rohlehr writes about most of the major male West Indian novelists and poets from the post-war generation: George Lamming, Martin Carter, Derek Walcott, Sam Selvon, Eric Roach, Roger Mais, and many others.

In addition to these two volumes of essays on literature, as well as a monograph on Kamau Brathwaite's *The Arrivants*, Rohlehr's career is noteworthy for another major strand: since the 1960s, he has published numerous essays on calypso and popular music, frequently in local newspapers and regional journals. This facet of his career culminated in the publication of his more than 600-page *Calypso and Society in Pre-Independence Trinidad* in 1990. Describing music as "one of the surest guides towards an understanding of our milieu and our moment," Rohlehr adopts the techniques of textual analysis to show the dialectical relationship of cultural production and the society in which it is produced.[8] Rohlehr's dual interest, in literature as well as music, makes him an important pioneer in the trend towards cultural studies which emerges full-blown during the 1990s amongst Caribbean literary critics such as Juan Flores, Carolyn Cooper, and Lisa Sánchez González.[9]

The socio-cultural factors that form the context for this movement into cultural studies can be seen in the introduction to Juan Otero Garabís' recent study *Nación y ritmo*. He argues that technological and political developments now mean that literature no longer articulates the nation. Otero Garabís begins from Benedict Anderson's concept of the nation as an imagined community; he summarizes Anderson's argument that "the appearance of newspapers was fundamental to the creation of the 'horizontal comradeship' that we call nations."[10] If print-capitalism, in particular the newspaper and the novel, was during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries the most important vehicle for transmitting the form and content of the nation, Otero Garabís wonders if "the growth of what Walter Benjamin calls the 'age of mechanical reproduction'—what would later become an age of mass communication—implies a reconfiguration of the groups who participate in nation building."[11] He continues to reflect on the new forms that dominate our contemporary imaginary, and what kinds of communities they might be imagining: "in this sense, the appearance of the film industry, the music industry, radio and television provoked and promoted new forms of social representation which affected the ways in which national communities conceived (of) themselves."[12] Finally, Otero Garabís links these reflections to Doris Sommer's idea of the centrality of the novel to nation-building in Latin America: "These means of communication will be the new producers of 'foundational fictions' they will construct new national imaginaries which reflect changing relations . . . between social groups."[13]

Meditating on the historical place of various cultural forms and modes of production in their respective societies and historical moments leads Otero Garabís to posit popular music as the form through which the contemporary Caribbean transnation is imagined. Similar to other critics, Otero Garabís locates popular music, in contrast to the cultural elitism of the experimental novel, as an art form created by and for the "pueblo."[14] Music, because of its wide dissemination by the culture industry, travels more effectively across boundaries of nation, language and class, and is more effective in producing transnational and

sometimes translinguistic communities. As his argument proceeds, Otero Garabís moves away from literary texts to suggest that the salsa of Willie Colón, the *nueva trova* of Silvio Rodríguez and the hybrid rhythms of Juan Luis Guerra are the forms in which Puerto Rican, Cuban and Dominican transnationalism are today simultaneously challenged and imagined.

Imbuing the field of literary criticism with models and methods learned from popular culture is thus a primary strategy for giving postcolonial Caribbean criticism a voice in the public sphere. Indeed, mourning the culture industry's emasculation of an anticolonial literature able to participate in political and collective action, while trying to reinstitute that presence by investing the printed word with the sounds of popular music, becomes a major theme of contemporary Caribbean literature.[15] Yet if, as the impulse towards cultural studies suggests, music is the best site for understanding the ways that transnationalism is imagined, my readings of "Plástico" and *La guaracha del Macho Camacho* will emphasize how these articulations run along the circuits of multinational capitalism.[16] Readings of these texts reveal how the turn to music as more "transgressive" or resistant than literature relies on two forms of nostalgia: the idea of popular culture as pure and uncorrupted, as well as nostalgia for the anticolonial ideal of culture as a weapon in decolonization struggles.[17] Rather than substituting music into literature's former position as privileged cultural medium, this essay brings together a literary and a popular text as a way to advocate for a critical practice that takes account of cultural production as a field of diverse practices occupying distinct positions in relation to one another as well as economic, political, and social structures.[18]

The positions taken in *Siembra* and *La Guaracha del Macho Camacho* point to the seductions but also the dangers of the intellectual's entry into the commodified public sphere. On the album *Siembra* (1978), Rubén Blades and Willie Colón claim the roles of spokesmen and social critics that during the 1970s were increasingly unavailable to literary practitioners. Blades and Colón explicitly envision themselves as successors to the anticolonial writers of the 1950s and 1960s. An examination of the first track, "Plástico," shows most clearly how the song's language and stance allow the *salsero* to connect to Caribbean legacies of revolutionary resistance. "Plástico" is a critique of neo-colonialism and cultural imperialism, beginning with the threat of foreign contamination and ending with a call to arms for the working masses to defend Latin essence. This faith in what might be referred to as the "folk" or "pueblo" as a redemptive agent, coupled with a positioning of the intellectual as able to articulate his people's aspirations and thus lead them forward, show Blades and Colón's project to be a renewal of anticolonial literary modernism through the medium of music. A reading of "Plástico" will point to how this resistant *salsero* persona is forged, and the complications of a musician adopting this anticolonial stance in the context of postcoloniality.

The album opens by laying down a funky disco-like track, whose beat and instrumentation mark it as decidedly un-Latin. The synthesizer and drum-track opening quickly give way to the rhythm, brass section, and beat identifiable as

salsa, but not before this overture has introduced the questions of cultural authenticity and contamination that will be the song's themes. Disco is here invoked as product of a U.S. culture industry, a threat to Latin American indigenous culture and self-determination as identified by theories of neo-colonialism through cultural imperialism. From this opening, Blades and Colón will advocate the position Néstor García Canclini attributes to "the adherents of dependency theory" who "accus[e] the bourgeoisie of a lack of loyalty to national interests."[19]

After the overture allusively introduces these themes, the song's first lines launch into a Spanish-language critique of the commodification of everyday life. Although the first few stanzas contain few obvious historical or geographical markers, the sense of "us" and "them" comes from the framing of the problem as "those over there," like the "chica plástica" who is subject of the first stanza.[20] What makes this woman "plastic" is an obsession with social status and the acquisition of material things to mark that status. As a result, she and her social circle—the feminized, "elegant" man introduced in the song's next stanza—are allowing commodity relations to corrupt simple human activities such as conversation (talking only about car makes and models), friendship (avoiding anyone below them on the social scale) and love (marrying someone from the right family and with the right profession).

In the following stanzas, the critique extends to the plastic cities that these plastic people inhabit, heartless and emotionless places that worship only the cold symbol of the dollar. Instead of a generalized lament about money, this mention of the dollar brings the song's historical specificity into more obvious focus, presumably locating the setting in a place that uses the dollar for its currency (in this context, likely the United States or Puerto Rico). Along with the reference to "those over there," this localization invokes the Latino-Caribbean experience of the divided nation. Unlike "Pedro Navaja," the most famous track from Siembra, which strongly identifies its setting as Latino/a New York—it features the line "I like to live in América" and ends with a fictional news broadcast mentioning "two people killed in New York"—"Plástico," by not identifying its locale, occupies a transnational, in-between positioning, appealing to Caribbean people at home and abroad, "aquí" and "allá."[21]

From this point, "Plástico" shifts to a different movement, breaking from the rhythmic and lyrical pattern established in the first four stanzas. This middle section acts musically and narratively as a bridge between the initial, descriptive stanzas, and the didactic latter half of the song. Forming this bridge is crucial for an anticolonial politics, moving from identifying the problem to articulating a solution:

> Listen Latino, listen brother, listen friend,
> never sell your destiny
> for gold or for comfort.
> [. . .]
> Let us all go forward so that

> together we can end
> the ignorance
> that makes us susceptible
> to imported models
> that are not the solution.

Blades speaks here directly to his listeners: "Oye Latino, oye hermano, oye amigo." This address establishes the alliance that is meant to stand up to and oppose "plasticization." Different levels of solidarity are implied; of these forms of identification (the nation of brothers, the sympathy of friends) the first term in Blades' address ("oye Latino"), extends the boundaries of brotherhood or casual friendship. This constituency, frequently articulated in Blades' songs as an all-encompassing diaspora including Latin America as well as the Spanish-speaking United States, unites the two possible interpretations of the first part of the song—that the "plastic people" are a U.S. bourgeoisie, or their Puerto Rican counterparts—branching out, as the end of the song will make explicit, to incorporate all of the Americas. As a transnational text, "Plástico" is addressed to the victims of the commodification of all aspects of life, whether in metropolitan centers or postcolonial margins.[22]

"Plástico" ends with an impassioned appeal to the people of the Americas to come together against "imported models" threatening traditional, organic cultures throughout the hemisphere. This second half of the song is performed as chorus and improvisational response, offering suggestions couched in at first biblical ("From dust we all come and we all will return"), and increasingly political, language. The language of the second half of the song clearly signals its indebtedness to radical movements in both U.S. Latino/a and Caribbean communities. "P'alante" invokes the publication by the same name of the Young Lords, a radical pro-independence and anti-capitalist Nuyorican organization from the early 1970s.[23] Other lines directly borrow from the slogans of the Cuban Revolution—"Seguiremos unidos y al final venceremos", "Vamos todos adelante"—slogans that were disseminated to U.S. Latino/as through radical organizations like the Young Lords.

Cuba acts as an inspiration for the kind of pan-American solidarity imagined in "Plástico." The song finally posits an honest and hard-working laboring class as the subject of this pan-American revolution, "a people of flesh and blood" with "faces of work and of sweat":

> But ladies and gentlemen, amidst the plastic
> hopeful faces are also seen;
> proud faces that are working for a united Latin America
> and for a tomorrow of hope and freedom.
> We see the faces of work and sweat;
> of a people of flesh and bones who have not been sold;
> of a people working and searching for a new path, proud of their inheritance
> and to be Latin(o);
> of a race, united, like Bolivar dreamed of.

"Plástico" closes with a role call of Latin American nations who, in the late 1970s, it was still possible to imagine participating in the search for a "new path" between U.S. imperialist capitalism and Soviet-style communism. The last "nation" in this role call, as "Plástico" fades out, is "El Barrio," the song closing with the incorporation of the diaspora and a hope for its radical potential in the liberation of the hemisphere.

Reading "Plástico" against *La guaracha del Macho Camacho* highlights how Blades and Colón never engage with the complexities of their own positioning, as Latino/a artists addressing Latin America and telling them to free themselves from U.S. cultural imperialism, while doing so through the medium of a cultural form created in the United States and distributed via U.S. economic circuits. "Plástico" is part of a rich tradition of Latino/a intellectuals taking advantage of the position of enunciation enabled by their U.S. location, beginning with José Martí's organizing of anti-Spanish and anti-U.S. support for Cuban independence through the channels of U.S.-based newspapers and organizations, and continuing in works like *Once Upon a Time in Mexico* by Chicano Robert Rodríguez, a Hollywood blockbuster that is also a clear indictment of U.S. imperial adventures south of the border. Indeed, this is indicative of the contradictory positioning of the Latino/a, as potential spokesperson for Latin America and the Caribbean embedded in what Martí famously called "the belly of the beast" and thus having privileged access to the ear of power. Blades and Colón, as much as any *salseros*, position themselves as this kind of organic intellectual, translators for their native cultures who occupy a hinge, presumably able to speak and listen to both sides of the dialogue; it is no coincidence that both Blades and Colón have tried to run for elected office, Blades in Panamá and Colón in New York. Yet the desire to occupy the space of the spokesperson, in presuming to speak for his or her people, removes the representative from the experience of the subaltern and threatens to become complicit in their silencing.[24]

The choice of Spanish as medium is one way in which Blades affirms his allegiance to "the Other America," even while sacrificing some of his efficacy in speaking truth to an Anglophone power. "Plástico" establishes itself from the beginning as a bilingual text, both in the initial use of disco music, and in its opening line deploying "Chanel Number Three" in English. Although this code-switching is not pursued for the rest of the song, its presence at the outset is a nod to a Latino/a discursive based in Spanglish. At the same time, the song's attitude towards bilingualism, I would like to suggest, is less a "Spanglish" aesthetic than an "espanglés," linguistically based in a Spanish substrate and only occasionally complemented with English words and phrasings. This "espanglés" is the Puerto Rican flip-side of the "Spanglish" favored by Nuyorican poets during this time period as a way of decentering English dominance in their writing. In both "Plástico" and *La guaracha del Macho Camacho*, this "espanglés" is both derided as a contaminated and imperfect corruption of proper *español*, and yet utilized with artistic license, as a way of creating hybrid new cultural forms engaging with, but not entirely given over to, a U.S.-based culture industry.

Luis Rafael Sánchez's novel *La guaracha del Macho Camacho* (1976) speaks directly to the project laid out in "Plástico." The novel is similarly concerned with the effects of materialism on the Caribbean language and culture, but it expresses certain reservations with U.S.-based interventions in Puerto Rican culture and politics, casting doubt on whether the notion that the *salsero* can carry forward the legacy of anticolonialism is even possible under the regime of postcoloniality. More explicitly than Blades and Colón, Sánchez identifies Puerto Rico as primary front in the hemispheric battle against U.S. cultural imperialism. As the novel makes clear, Puerto Rico's location, at the leading edge of spreading U.S. commercialism, has made the island especially ambivalent about its relationship to cultural products originating from its diaspora in the United States.

La guaracha del Macho Camacho appeared in 1976 as a landmark event in Puerto Rican literature. Efraín Barradas speculates: "I don't think that in the history of Puerto Rican literature there had been another novel as commented upon by its contemporaries in the initial moment of its publication as *La guaracha*."[25] Politically, the mid-1970s in Puerto Rico were marked by the first popularly elected pro-statehood government; public intellectuals like Rafael Sánchez were struggling to define their place in this society, while at the same time, salsa was experiencing its *edad de oro*, a "golden age" with performers like Eddie Palmieri, Héctor Lavoe, Blades and Colón. For writers and critics envious of the public voices of these *salseros*, *La guaracha del Macho Camacho* suggested the possibility that literature could have something to say, that it could reach a broad public sphere as well as music. Arcadio Díaz Quiñones writes of the effect the novel had on Puerto Rican intellectuals in his introduction to the edition republished in 2000: "*La guaracha* had immediate repercussions [. . .] It allowed a considerable number of Puerto Ricans to intervene, from literature or criticism, in cultural debates."[26]

For such a challenging novel, the plot of *La guaracha del Macho Camacho* is quite straightforward. The duration of the novel lasts only a few minutes and contains almost no action: the narrative shifts between a traffic jam where we find Senator Vicente Reinosa and his son, stuck in separate cars; a mistress awaiting the Senator, alternately called La China Hereje and La Madre; and the Senator's wife, Graciela. The narrative revolves around the consciousnesses of these four main characters, focusing on the relationship between Senator Reinosa and his mistress; Graciela's sessions with her therapist; the conversations between La Madre and her friend Doña Chon; and the events of the traffic jam. The novel treats the predatory relationship between the Senator and La China Hereje as symbolic of Puerto Rico's relationship to the United States; Reinosa, explicitly aligned with the United States as part of the island's pro-statehood party, acts as local bourgeois politician whose wealth and position of power allow him to take advantage of La China, the lower-class woman who needs his money. Just as in the first verse of "Plástico," then, imperialism can be read on the body of the "native" female.

The enormous traffic jam, the *tapón* which is part and parcel of Puerto Rican and U.S. industrialization and modernization, frustrates the drivers at the same time that it freezes everyone in their place. It stops the action and ensures that virtually nothing happens throughout the novel; even the suggestion of change or mobility in this world appears unthinkable. This stasis is especially marked when contrasted with one of Sánchez 's other major works, *La guagua aérea* (1983). *La guagua aérea*, in contrast to *La guaracha del Macho Camacho*, is organized around movement; the entire story takes place on a flight (an air bus, as the title calls it) between San Juan and New York, and has become a founding text for the in-between Latino/a community defined by that border crossing.[27] Far from the world of *La guagua aérea*, *La guaracha del Macho Camacho* captures in its language and form the social stasis of a world in which movement is *not* available to all: amidst the standstill, the novel's energy comes not from its plot, but from its language, which twists and contorts as it incorporates the sounds of the street and the radio. The novel's most memorable moments come from how the language of television commercials, of *telenovelas*, and of radio DJs mingles with the performances of Macho Camacho himself, the singer whose *guaracha* crosses class-lines and seems to be the only thing capable of circulating inside the traffic jam.

Lisa Sánchez González and Juan Otero Garabís are two of the critics who *La guaracha del Macho Camacho* has allowed to, as Díaz Quiñones puts it, "intervene in cultural debates." Both critics use readings of the novel to make their move away from literature and towards music as the articulation of the transnation. Sánchez González ends *Boricua Literature* with the chapter "*Ya deja eso*: Towards an epi-fenomenal approach to Boricua cultural studies," which takes its title from *La guaracha del Macho Camacho*. Sánchez González arrives at her "epi-*fenomenal*" approach, of displacing literary with cultural studies, through her reading of *La guaracha del Macho Camacho*. Despite the novel's literariness, Sánchez González's reads the novel as signaling the extraliterary direction in which she takes her work. She writes:

> Macho Camacho's guaracha gives voice, in an unmistakably Puerto Rican accent, to a collectivizing realization . . . the shared experience of hearing it . . . provides its characters—and its readers—a dynamic moment for making it ontological, for assuming the epi-*fenomenal* posture of "ya deja eso"—enough already—and re/turning to what has been perhaps the only genuinely inclusive national articulation in Puerto Rico's history: popular music.[28]

Sánchez González argues that *La guaracha del Macho Camacho* "is less a novel than a poetically inscribed invitation to dance, the music being everywhere implied but never representable."[29] The novel's stylistic resemblance to popular speech and music allows it to be "anti-canonical" as it breaks down hierarchies between the spoken and written word.[30] The novelist, she contends, totally subverts the hierarchical division between high and low cultures by creating a novel which is actually a song.

Like Sánchez González, Otero Garabís gives *La guaracha del Macho Camacho* a primary place in his argument in *Nación y Ritmo*, also using a reading of the novel as a transition into analyses of musical texts. Yet while Sánchez González sees the novel opening up new spaces for academic study of Latino/a popular culture, Otero Garabís understands it as an effort to close down and control the threats of the U.S. culture industry on Puerto Rican identity. Otero Garabís reads Luis Rafael Sánchez's resistance to the contaminated world of popular music as the privileging of experimental literature as an autonomous space, independent of market concerns: "the novel aspires to create with the reader an intelletual community that, although contaminated with the play of mass culture, maintains the necessary distance to write."[31] Citing an interview in which the author of *La guaracha del Macho Camacho* posits "Puerto Rican literature as a wall against the unbearable vulgarity of assimilation," Otero Garabís argues that the novel allows Sánchez to critique the growth of commercialism and offer the lettered city as a bastion against foreign penetration and the dilution of a literarily constructed, Spanish-speaking *puertorriqueñidad*.[32]

Reading *La guaracha del Macho Camacho* as an elitist, anti-popular attack on the contaminated culture of the masses leads Otero Garabís to the same place as Sánchez González, to an abandonment of literature as inescapably tied to upper class forms of knowledge. Although they arrive at a similar position, Sánchez González and Otero Garabís represent the two opposing poles that critics have generally chosen in discussing *La guaracha*: the novel either seeks to subvert or reinforce the position of high culture; it accomplishes this through the adoption or critique, respectively, of the language and techniques of popular culture. I would like to suggest that these approaches breakdown into a rough, perhaps stereotypical "readings from aquí/readings from allá" binary.

Along with Sánchez González, other "diasporic" approaches to the novel have tended to emphasize the liberatory potential of popular culture. Frances Aparicio, for example, reads in the novel "a stylistic revolution based in the poetics of vulgarity and in the subversive presence of Caribbean popular rhythms."[33] On the other side, the reception from the island has usually been to view the novel as an Adornian critique of mass culture as mass deception, emphasizing the deterioration of Puerto Rican identity in light of U.S. cultural domination. Arnaldo Cruz, for example, writes that "*La guaracha* is essentially a novel about Puerto Rico's mass culture and its complex relationship with American colonialism," and as such, it is "a searing indictment of Puerto Rico's colonial reality and the role of the American-controlled mass media in maintaining this colonial status."[34] The "diaspoRican" reading and the "island *independentista*" reading each betrays elements of self-interest; the diaspoRican approach hardly wants to see in the novel a critique of the contaminating influence of U.S.-made, Latino/a culture like salsa; the *independentistas* want the novel to be a defense of a "pure" Puerto Rican identity against foreign culture industries.[35] The divergent interpretations of these two orientations, both wanting to claim the novel for their own cause, typifies the ongoing schisms between independence movements on the island, defining themselves against U.S. imperialism, and radical movements originating in the diaspora.[36]

La guaracha del Macho Camacho can lend itself to both of these positions because of the in-between positioning which actually undermines many of the central assumptions of each. On the one hand, the novel mocks island elitism, having the Senator's Hispanophile wife express her belief that art should be "elevated and refined," that literature shouldn't be about "people who sweat."[37] *La guaracha del Macho Camacho* is surely not what Graciela has in mind; the novel is peopled with characters sweating and cursing, and shot through with the English of television commercials and political sloganeering, all clearly unsuited for her idea of high literature. At the same time, as much as the diasporic reading wants the novel to celebrate salsa as the culture of the transnational Puerto Rican working classes, the novel repeatedly describes Macho Camacho's *guaracha* as an outside force which "infiltrates," "invade[s]," or "has taken over" the country.[38]

This language of a foreign threat appears to echo Blades and Colón's suggestion that being "plastic" is an unnatural state for the Caribbean: "Plástico" accuses its characters of adhering to "imported models," but holds on to hope that the foreign will eventually "melt" in the tropical sun. Yet Sánchez's novel provides no such outside space from which to construct an authentic, uncontaminated Latino/a or Puerto Rican culture. Colón's early albums depict the *salsero* as a resistant subjectivity, capable of "starting riots" in the words of one of his more famous album covers, *La Gran Fuga/The Big Break*. On that album, Colón is pictured in an FBI Most Wanted poster, along with text describing him as "armed with trombone" and adding that he and singer Héctor Lavoe, "are highly dangerous in a crowd and are capable of starting riots: *people immediately start to dance*."[39] In this formulation, the *salsero* as spokesperson is also revolutionary: dancing and improvisation are identified as a challenge to the status quo, a communal activity that puts the *pueblo* in motion and hints at a threat to established power.

In the novel, the DJ repeatedly identifies Macho Camacho as this resistant *salsero*, talking at one point about how Macho Camacho is "into salsa."[40] The DJ emphasizes Macho Camacho's allegiance to the ghetto, in particular through his blackness:

> What Macho Camacho has put into his guaracha is his soul, that heart of his that's also the great heart of a man who's gone hungry. Yes, ladies and gentlemen, friends, gone hungry the way a man does who's sweaty and poor and bears the mark of the color of sufferance. Because he's no mulatto, black is what he is, pitch black and let's leave it at that.[41]

The DJ's discourse locates in Macho Camacho's cultural product, the *guaracha* which his supposed suffering has produced, a form of resistance in opposition to or outside of the empty shell presented by the culture industry.

But at other points, the novel suggests that this may be an overly utopian reading of popular music, that in fact the DJ, and the packaging of Macho Camacho, is only another layer of commodified culture as instrument of control. Contrary to the DJ's characterization of Macho Camacho as spokesman of the subaltern, within the scope of the novel the *guaracha* appears to be as hollow and as much a part of the disciplinary system as the upper class's elitist conception of culture. The system which creates and disseminates the *guaracha* aspires to totalitarian control; the song is described as establishing "absolute rule," and "a regime of absolutism."[42] The DJ calls Macho Camacho himself "the priest or pastor or preacher of the thing," suggesting his song's complicity in the religious deification of commodities, the "thingification" of Puerto Rican society.[43] In Macho Camacho's *guaracha*, life is a thing ("la vida es una cosa fenomenal"), a depthless phenomenon without context or consequence. The *guaracha* paints a picture of life as nothing but hip music, dancing, and sex, a notable distance from the violence, poverty and frustration which the characters actually experience as life.

In one of the rare moments in which someone inside the novel sees through this surface and speaks with some lucidity, the *guaracha* enters to subdue and silence the protest. The scene is observed by La China Hereje on a bus: "The country doesn't work," proclaims another passenger on the bus, repeating it over and over "facing a red traffic light that was black because the traffic signal wasn't working."[44] He arrives at his conclusion through sustained thought about the situation, moving from observing the basic phenomenon, to a higher understanding of the superstructural cause: "Because the light has gone, because the light goes every afternoon, because the afternoon doesn't work, because the air conditioning doesn't work, because the country doesn't work." His protest is greeted with two reactions:

> The passengers signed up in two opposing parties: one a minority of timid people in agreement and the other a vociferous majority who proceeded to intone with a verve reserved for national anthems Macho Camacho's irrepressible guaracha *Life Is a Phenomenal Thing*, the deeper tones provided by the driver: wiry and skinny, a wild guarachomaniac; the bus afire with the shrieks and roars of the majority party, the bus afire with the torches of happiness held high by the passengers of the vociferous majority party: happy because with the neat swipe of a guaracha they had crushed the attempt at dissidence.[45]

As this passage illustrates, the *guaracha* serves the quasi-religious function of a national anthem in Sánchez's novel. The song's inane lyrics and irresistible beat induce La China Hereje and her neighbors to ignore the social *tapón* which has them trapped, and instead dance their troubles away.

The Adornian reading of *La guaracha del Macho Camacho* might see the complete domination of this disciplinary system; the novel, though, suggests that control is never absolute. The guaracha may be mass produced as a means of pacifying the population, but the ends to which people put the song are beyond

the control of this culture industry. While protests may appear to come from a minority, that minority is never silenced. The *tapón* which has immobilized and ossified Puerto Rican society makes resistance as social movement appear futile, but the multitude nonetheless insists on resisting and keeping moving. Although it achieves no obvious purpose, countless drivers loudly protest their frustration by blowing their horns: "Foreseen and collective and conscious recognition of the uselessness of protest but: a chorus of horns proceeds, altogether, *todos a una* . . . the enwheeled multitude brakes, guarachas, advances, brakes, guarachas, advances, brakes, guarachas, advances."[46]

The *tapón* opens up the possibility for lucidity for some of the characters, such as the man on the bus who realizes that the country doesn't work. As the *tapón* persists, the drivers begin to leave their cars and move towards understanding the reality of their circumstances: "All chaufferdom, the whole passagerial flock, had risen up onto the car roofs in order to find out what the fuck is going on up ahead: a swirl of asking asked by those who have no access to the privileged positions from where one cán appreciate what the fuck is going on up ahead."[47] Only by standing on their cars, these potentially atomizing prisons, can those down below begin to see through false consciousness to the nature of their situation. Although the *guaracha* enters again in this scene to deflate the tension, the threat has been established that unrest will incite the multitude to more than permanent partying.[48]

In this moment, *La guaracha del Macho Camacho* demonstrates its affinities with the imagined project laid out in "Plástico": in both cases, the goal is for greater insight, to be able to see the transnational spaces interpolating the "Other America" and the United States. Even so, the distance between the two suggests the very different positions of literature and music today. Lacking the assured revolutionary vision that anticolonialism provides in "Plástico," *La guaracha* nevertheless refuses to resign itself to postcolonial pessimism, insisting instead on the space between these oppositions. Taken together, then, these two texts point to the possibilities and contradictions opened up for Caribbean culture by the passage from colonialism to postcoloniality; a culture that is always already a commodity, but can use its place within economic circuits to reconstitute a postcolonial public sphere.

Rather than celebrating the decentering of literature as a blow against the cultural monasticism of an elite upper class or lamenting this deprivileging as the loss of an idealized literary public sphere of rational exchange, both "Plástico" and *La guaracha del Macho Camacho* seek to interrogate popular music as the medium for a postcolonial public sphere. Imagining new roles for postcolonial Caribbean art leads both of these texts to highlight especially the transnational spaces interpolating the Caribbean and the United States. Blades and Colón figure this mutual implicatedness as an underlying connection, best seen from the trans-ghetto—"busca al fondo y su razón," they tell us. Sánchez imagines the connections as overarching, floating through the air in television commercials and radio broadcasts—a system of control the people below can't see without a more privileged vantage point. Like Spanglish and espanglés,

these are the two different faces of globalization: the spread of corporate America to the south, bringing the people of the "Other America" to the north. This in-between and in-motion positioning of Latino-Caribbean culture offers the possibility of seeing the complicated mutual dependency of North and South the double vision that Blades, Colón, and Sánchez identify as the goal of transnational postcolonial art.

Endnotes

1. I distinguish between postcolonialism or postcolonial studies, as academic practice, and postcoloniality as a historical designator. Scott makes this distinction in David Scott, *Conscripts of Modernity: The Tragedy of Colonial Enlightenment* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2004); see also Graham Huggan, *The Postcolonial Exotic: Marketing the Margins* (New York: Routledge, 2001).

2. Paul Gilroy reads the reggae star against this moment of flux and contradiction—Paul Gilroy, "Could you be loved? Bob Marley, anti-politics, and universal sufferation," *Critical Quarterly* 47, no. 1-2 (July 2005): 226-245.

3. My essay "Authority" examines how two Anglophone Caribbean writers dealt with their new relationship to the public sphere after anticolonialism—Raphael Dalleo, "Authority and the Occasion for Speaking in the Caribbean Literary Field: George Lamming and Martin Carter," *Small Axe* 20 (September 2006): 19-39.

4. In one of the foundational critiques of the field, Dorfman and Mattelart look specifically at Disney's mass produced comics as primary vehicle of cultural imperialism—see Ariel Dorfman and Armand Mattelart, *How to Read Donald Duck: Imperialist Ideology in the Disney Comic*, trans. David Kunzle (New York: International General, 1975). By contrast, a recent essay collection returning to the subject of Disney's role in cultural imperialism moves away from the critique of text to examine new media such as movies—see Brenda Ayres, ed., *The Emperor's Old Groove: Decolonizing Disney's Magic Kingdom* (New York: Peter Lang, 2003).

5. Lisa Sánchez González, *Boricua Literature: A Literary History of the Puerto Rican Diaspora* (New York: New York University Press, 2001), 168.

6. Rohlehr's contributions to these debates appear in: Gordon Rohlehr, *My Strangled City and Other Essays* (Port of Spain, Trinidad and Tobago: Longman Trinidad, 1992); "The Folk in Caribbean Literature," *Tapia Literary Supplement* 2, no. 11 (December 17, 1972): 7-8, 13-14; "The Creative Writer and West Indian Society," *Kaie* 11 (1973): 38-77; and "A Carrion Time," *Bim* 58 (June 1975): 92-109.

7. Gordon Rohlehr, *The Shape of That Hurt and Other Essays* (Port of Spain, Trinidad and Tobago: Longman Trinidad, 1992), vii.

8. Gordon Rohlehr, *Calypso and Society in Pre-Independence Trinidad* (Port of Spain: Gordon Rohlehr, 1990), vi.

9. Flores, Cooper, and Sánchez González display the postcolonial impulse towards suspicion of literature as part of the desire for indigenous cultural forms: for each critic, literature is aligned with the high culture of the Caribbean's ruling classes and foreign imperial powers, whether England or the United States. The novel, with its "assimilationist proclivities," can no longer represent a Caribbean form of knowledge to use against the metropole—Juan Flores, *From Bomba to Hip-hop: Puerto Rican Culture and Latino Identity* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000), 183. The critics thus ironically repeat the same desire we will see in *La guaracha del Macho Camacho*: focusing on music becomes part of an attempt to "turn history upside-down," to give political significance to literary endeavors and to create a public role for an increasingly privatized literary field—Carolyn Cooper, *Noises in the Blood: Orality, Gender and the "Vulgar" Body of Jamaican Popular Culture* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1995), 174; for more on this tendency in Latino/a Studies—see the introduction and first chapter of Raphael Dalleo and Elena Machado Sáez, *The Latino/a Canon and the Emergence of Post-Sixties Literature* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007).

10. Juan Otero Garabís, *Nación y ritmo: "descargas" desde el Caribe* (San Juan, P.R.: Ediciones Callejón, 2000), 15—translations are my own.

11. Otero Garabís, *Nación*, 15.

12. Otero Garabís, *Nación*, 15.

13. Otero Garabís, *Nación*, 16.

14. Otero Garabís, *Nación*, 155-56.

15. These contradictory impulses are perhaps best illustrated in Earl Lovelace's novel *The Dragon Can't Dance*.

16. Sylvia Wynter, in a remarkably prescient essay written in 1968, notes:

> The concept of "people," better expressed by the Spanish "pueblo," is vanishing fast. The writer who returns from exile at the metropolitan centre to "write for his people" . . . must come face to face with the fact that his 'people' has become the "public." And the public in the Caribbean, equally like the public in the great metropolitan centres, are being conditioned through television, radio, and advertising, to want what the great corporations of production in the culture industry, as in all others, have conditioned them to want.—Sylvia Wynter, "We Must Learn to Sit Down Together and Talk About a Little Culture: Reflections on West Indian Writing and Criticism. Part I, *Jamaica Journal* 2, no. 4 (December 1968): 25.

Wynter distinguishes between the anticolonial ideal of the people as collective actors, and the postcolonial reality of a public as a collection of private individuals, linking this discontinuity explicitly to the growth of a broader mass production of culture and communication in Caribbean society. She is interested, then, not only in slipping the yoke of the European literary tradition, but also of the political implications of replacing that tradition with a model of culture based on consumerism. As the postcolonial Caribbean's place in the world system shifts from that of a producer of raw materials to a consumer of foreign products, she suggests that Caribbean cultural studies becomes potentially complicit in following the logic of this new system. If Wynter's reservations towards popular culture appear reminiscent of certain works of the Frankfurt School, it is no coincidence that the only "non-Caribbean" text listed among Wynter's "Criticism Consulted" is *Prisms* by Theodor Adorno.

17. García Canclini identifies the first of these forms of nostalgia as the idealized view of popular culture "as the 'expression of the personality of a particular people,'" dependent on a "romantic" vision of the people "as a homogeneous and autonomous whole, whose spontaneous creativity represented the highest expression of human values and the way of life to which humanity should return"—Néstor García Canclini, *Transforming Modernity: Popular Culture in Mexico*, trans. Lidia Lozano (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1993), 21 and 22.

18. In *The Field of Cultural Production*, Bourdieu offers a description of the literary field in nineteenth-century France; while the specifics of this description are almost

entirely inapplicable to the contemporary Caribbean, the idea of cultural practices as a field is a useful place to begin imagining the relationships between literature, literary criticism, music, and the international market—Pierre Bourdieu, *The Field of Cultural Production*, ed. Randal Johnson (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993).

19. Néstor García Canclini, *Consumers and Citizens: Globalization and Multicultural Conflicts*, trans. George Yúdice (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001), 44.

20. Transcriptions and translations of the lyrics to "Plástico" are my own.

21. Duany's "Popular Music in Puerto Rico," a groundbreaking work in the academic analysis of salsa, devotes one of its sections to "Pedro Navaja," and features as an appendix a transcription of the song's lyrics—Jorge Duany, "Popular Music in Puerto Rico: Toward an Anthropology of Salsa," *Latin American Music Review* 5, no. 2 (Autumn-Winter 1984): 186-216.

22. The community Blades addresses remains grounded in language, as only listeners who understand Spanish will be able to follow his subsequent instructions ("nunca vendas tu destino," for example). Indeed, despite its hybrid and diasporic perspective, "Plástico" does tend at times to assert xenophobic and closed notions of cultural authenticity. For example, the opening sounds of "Plástico" clearly are meant to evoke disco as threat to authentic Latino/a culture; in so doing, the song depends on a construct of disco music as the monolithic product of a bourgeois culture industry, rather than the dynamic interaction of corporate record companies, potential music consumers from a variety of class and race positions, and the musicians themselves.

"Plástico" is not alone as a Latino/a text in tending to obscure internally marginalized and colonized aspects of U.S. culture and society, in particular of African Americans; Juan González, in *Harvest of Empire*, refers a number of times to "black and white America" as if both groups occupy the same relationship to Latino/as and Latin America, a surprising oversight considering González's experience working alongside African-American groups in New York City. Juan Flores and Lisa Sánchez González, on the other hand, take a very different perspective in *From Bomba to Hip-hop* and *Boricua Literature*, emphasizing the commonalities of these Nuyorican and African-American experiences in New York. Flores even calls Latino culture "black," in the sense of being integral to yet marginalized by the U.S. mainstream.

23. For more on the Young Lords—see Andres Torres and José Velázquez, eds., *The Puerto Rican Movement: Voices from the Diaspora* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1998).

24. Mendieta's essay "Latinas/os" makes a case for the need for Latino/as to act as public intellectuals in representing the interests of Latin America in the United States—Eduardo Mendieta, "What Can Latinas/os Learn From Cornel West? The Latino Postcolonial Intellectual in the Age of the Exhaustion of Public Spheres," *Nepantla: Views from South* 4, no. 2 (2003): 213-233.

25. Efraín Barradas, *Para leer en puertorriqueño: Acercamiento a la obra de Luis Rafael Sánchez* (Río Piedras, P.R.: Editorial Cultural, 1981), 131—translations are my own.

26. Arcadio Díaz Quiñones, "Introducción," in *La guaracha del Macho Camacho*, by Luis Rafael Sánchez (Madrid: Cátedra, 2000), 15 — translations are my own.

27. Sandoval Sánchez represents this critical trend in identifying the air bus as the place where "the so-called 'floating identity' of Puerto Ricans is articulated not only between geographical spaces but also in the creations of a space in midair where identity intersects, overlaps, and multiplies"—Alberto Sandoval Sánchez, "Puerto Rican Identity Up in the Air: Air Migration, Its Cultural Representations, and Me 'Cruzando El Charco,'" in *Puerto Rican Jam: Essays on Politics and Culture*, ed. Frances Negrón-Muntaner and Ramón Grosfoguel (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 197.

28. Lisa Sánchez González, *Boricua Literature: A Literary History of the Puerto Rican Diaspora* (New York: New York University Press, 2001), 165.

29. Sánchez González, *Boricua*, 165.

30. Sánchez González, *Boricua*, 165 and 166.

31. Otero Garabís, *Nación*, 75.

32. Otero Garabís, *Nación*, 55.

33. Frances Aparicio, "Entre la guaracha y el bolero: Un ciclo de intertextos musicales en la nueva narrative puertorriqueña," *Revista Iberoamericana* 162-163 (1993), 73—translations are my own.

34. Arnaldo Cruz, "Repetition and the Language of the Mass Media in Luis Rafael Sánchez's *La guaracha del Macho Camacho*," *Latin American Literary Review* 13 (1985), 35 and 36.

35. Lao traces some of the contours of the interactions between island and diaspora in his essay "Islands"—Agustín Lao, "Islands at the Crossroads: Puerto Ricanness Traveling between the Translocal Nation and the Global City," in *Puerto Rican Jam: Essays on Politics and Culture*, ed. Frances Negrón-Muntaner and Ramón Grosfoguel (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 169-188; see also Negrón-Muntaner's essay on how, even more recently, reactions to Puerto Rican Barbie break down into these two perspectives—Frances Negrón-Muntaner, "Barbie's Hair: Selling Out Puerto Rican Identity in the Global Market," in *Latino/a Popular Culture*, ed. Michelle Habell-Pallán and Mary Romero (New York: New York University Press, 2002), 38-60.

36. Whalen writes about the conflicted relationship between radical movements from the island and the diaspora—Carmen Whalen, "Bridging Homeland and Barrio Politics: The Young Lords in Philadelphia," in *The Puerto Rican Movement: Voices from the Diaspora*, ed. Andres Torres and José Velázquez (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1998), 107-123.

37. Luis Rafael Sánchez, *Macho Camacho's Beat*, trans. Gregory Rabassa (New York: Pantheon Books, 1980), 86.

38. Luis Rafael Sánchez, *La guaracha del Macho Camacho* (Madrid: Cátedra, 2000), 20 and 121. As Otero Garabís points out, these descriptions echo the resistance during the 1970s of the Puerto Rican Left towards salsa as a foreign and inauthentic musical form, and the revival of folkloric music as the true cultural expression of Puerto Rican identity—Juan Otero Garabís, *Nación y ritmo: 'descargas' desde el Caribe* (San Juan, P.R.: Ediciones Callejón, 2000). Also see the work of Quintero Rivera for more on the reception of salsa by Puerto Rican intellectuals during the 1970s—Angel Quintero Rivera, "Migration and Worldview in Salsa Music," trans. Roberto Márquez, *Latin American Music Review* 24, no. 2 (2003): 210-232 and "La gran fuga, las identidades socioculturales y la concepción del tiempo en la música 'tropical,'" in *Caribe 2000: Definiciones, Identidades y Culturas Regionales y/a Nacionales*, ed. Lowell Fiet (Río Piedras, P.R.: Universidad de Puerto Rico, 1997), 24-44.

39. Colón and Lavoe's album covers are analyzed in Otero Garabís, *Nación y Ritmo*, Quintero Rivera, "La gran fuga," and Valentín Escobar, "El Hombre que Respira Debajo del Agua: Trans-*Boricua* Memories, Identities, and Nationalisms Performed through the Death of Héctor Lavoe," in *Situating Salsa: Global Markets and Local Meaning in Latin Popular Music*, ed. Lise Waxer (New York: Routledge, 2002), 161-186.

40. Sánchez, *La guaracha*, 79.

41. Sánchez, *La guaracha*, 99.
42. Sánchez, *La guaracha*, 27 and 45.
43. Sánchez, *La guaracha*, 129. Aimé Césaire writes about the "thingification" of another postcolonial colony, Martinique, in his *Discours sur le colonialisme*: "No human contact, but relations of domination and submission which turn the colonizing man into a classroom monitor, an army sergeant, a prison guard, a slave driver, and the indigenous man into an instrument of production. My turn to state an equation: colonization = 'thingification'"—Aimé Césaire, *Discourse on Colonialism*, trans. Joan Pinkham (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1955), 21.
44. Sánchez, *La guaracha*, 11.
45. Sánchez, *La guaracha*, 11-12.
46. Sánchez, *La guaracha*, 51.
47. Sánchez, *La guaracha*, 122.
48. The guaracha is often described as "a guaracha that incites to permanent partying"—Sánchez González, *Boricua*, 61.

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IV

THE (TRANS-)NATION (DIS-) EMBODIED