Essay

Pedagogies of the Vulgar: Lessons in Caribbean Music

Alexandra Sánchez Rolón *

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Pedagogies of the Vulgar: Lessons in Caribbean Music

Alexandra Sánchez Rolón

University of Pennsylvania, USA; asrolon@alumni.upenn.edu

Abstract

Theorists like M. Jacqui Alexander, Édouard Glissant, Saidiya Hartman, Carolyn Cooper, and Michelle Wright, this project reconsiders the "vulgarity" often attributed to Caribbean musical genres, like dancehall, dembow, and reguetón, as a pedagogical practice: an embodied, sensorial way of knowing that challenges colonial and racialized modes of aesthetics, morality, and order. Through an examination of Vybz Kartel's *Fever*, Tokischa's *Sistema de Patio*, and Bad Bunny's *El Apagón*, I examine how sound, image, and movement converge to create what Alexander calls "pedagogies," which simultaneously disturb and instruct. These pedagogies of the vulgar illuminate the ongoing impact of colonialism and plantation slavery in the Caribbean, particularly the gendered extraction of labor and capital that continues to shape daily life. In this context, vulgarity is not simply performed but inverted, prompting us to ask what is truly vulgar; Caribbean music and dance, or the systemic violence of Western modernity? These pedagogies foreground the paradoxical beauty of violence and survival, revealing how Caribbean peoples reconfigure "vulgarity" to craft pleasure and freedom amidst constraint. Embracing Michelle Wright's concept of "epiphenomenal time," this study invites readers to watch, listen, and feel; reminding us that the pedagogy of the vulgar must be embodied to be understood.

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Introduction

In the last several decades, urban Caribbean music genres such as Jamaican dancehall, Dominican dembow, and Puerto Rican reggaetón, have become global phenomenona. Yet, they too have been met with critiques of vulgarity, aimed at their oftentimes sexually explicit or violent content as well as dance styles. As Carolyn Cooper reminds us, however, the "vulgar" is not an inherent quality, but a signal of the "high/low-euro/afrocentric divide" that marks anything outside of the category of Man1, I use Wynter's "Man1" to expand Cooper's claim beyond the specificity of Jamaican culture and gesture towards the modern onto-epistemologies that make this high/low divide possible. notably Blackness, as being immoral or sub-human (8). In the context of these genres, then, their classification as vulgar reflects the modern onto-epistemological processes that debase their African origins. However, we might also consider their consistent use of qualities deemed vulgar as intentional, for as Cooper explains, the disturbance of vulgar noise "can be recognized as a profoundly malicious cry to upset the social order" (5). As such, this project examines the role of vulgarity within urban Caribbean music genres, using the music videos for Vybz Kartel's "Fever," Tokischa's "Sistema de Patio," and Bad Bunny's "El Apagón" as case studies. Paying attention to their aural, lyrical, and visual qualities, I argue that vulgarity functions as a pedagogical practice, one that speaks to M. Jacqui Alexander's multilayered definition of "pedagogies" as disturbing, yet informative. In this way, the pedagogy of vulgarity simultaneously reveals how the present-past of colonialism circumscribes daily life for Caribbean peoples, and the ways they enact pleasure in order to make living possible.

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I must confess that the writing of this project has not been easy; not for a lack of interest or enjoyment, but the difficulty of translating opaque, poetic practices As noted by Glissant's *Poetics of Relation*, poetics transcend the linearity and transparency of the textual, resulting in an opacity that is simultaneously total, yet not totalizing into the textual. When Édouard Glissant speaks of popular Caribbean musical styles as the "necessary creations of places where entire communities are struggling… in the face of a major, unrelenting threat," it comes as no surprise that he names those places as slums and ghettos (*Caribbean Discourse* 111). It is in the ghetto where "the present-past of involuntary servitude unfolds" and unless we surrender to the overwhelm of our senses that the ghetto requires, we miss the beautiful tragedies that lie beneath the surface, the "black folks shut out from almost every opportunity the city affords, but still intoxicated with freedom" (Hartman 6-8). The pedagogy of the vulgar that I put forth is a fully sensorial experience. It exceeds the boundaries of transparency, linearity, and time. Indeed, it is a pedagogy that relies on what Michelle Wright deems "epiphenomenal time," ephemeral moments of infinite possibility that collapse the past, present, and future into a "now" that can only be understood through sensorial perception (145). Epiphenomenal time launches us into site of our creation, and yet, just as quickly pulls us out.

This helps to explain my experience, for each time I watch the videos at hand, thousands of lessons, observations, and connections come to the fore, just to become virtually unintelligible once I hit pause and attempt to speak what I know I feel, or perhaps, what I feel I know. What to do, then? It's an experience reminiscent to an ongoing joke between Bonnie and I; a reference to a meme that says "I can't date outside my culture because how do I explain this?" and the "this" is, literally and symbolically, untranslatable. See here for reference. How do I capture every detail, lesson, and feeling onto the written? The answer is simple: I cannot, I should not. Instead, I allow the pedagogy of the vulgar to speak for itself, to remain as opaque as it possibly can. Thus, I resist a linear prescription of the vulgar's pedagogy, instead honing in on particular scenes where both the present-past and pleasure simultaneously take center stage, and parse through what they might show. I invite the reader to join in on this experience by clicking the link embedded in each section's subheading, This can be done by holding the ctrl key as you click on the subheading. to watch and listen, and perhaps even dance, for otherwise, the pedagogy of the vulgar cannot be made legible.

Vybz Kartel – "Fever"

"Fever" is arguably one of Kartel's most popular songs. When I shared with my Jamaican-American friends that I'd be analyzing a song called "Fever" (I hadn't heard it before this) for a project, they reacted in a similar fashion – first, with excitement, then, skeptical confusion: "Fever!? That's my song!... But wait, uh, for school? What can you get out of Fever besides…?" Lyrically, "Fever" describes Kartel's obsession with a woman; the feverish effect her wining and lovemaking have on him. Visually, "Fever" pans through changing scenes of Jamaican women dancing, whether individually, in couples, or in groups, interspersed with overhead drone shots of Kartel's home city of Portmore, Jamaica. I focus, however, on the scene found at two minutes and twenty-six seconds. Wearing a jockey cap and holding a jockey whip, the male protagonist stops thrusting into the female protagonist bent over in front of him, hopping onto her back and riding her as though simulating a horse race. Cooper reminds us of the prominence and "slackness" of horse-racing imagery within dancehall, as the jockey stands in for both the "verbal skill of sports commentators" executed by DJs, as well as the technical mastery of their sexual prowess (142). Audibly, Kartel playfully leans into this dual imagery, simulating the jockey commentary through his fast-paced delivery of "mi wah pussy / come ah yaad / fi di / best fuck" in Jamaican gypsy: "Milipee walapaa pulupoosilipee / Colopum ala my yalapaad / Fi li di li / Belepes fulupuk / Fi li di li / Belepes fulupuk."

As the female protagonist leans over with her face pointing downward, the image connotes "daggering," a theatrical style of dancehall performance where the woman's body acts as a prop, remaining motionless as the male partner thrusts into her at rapid speed (197 McCoy-Torres). As daggering assumes male-centeredness from a visual standpoint, it appears as a signal of the woman's sexual objectification. Yet, this would deny the complex subjectivity that lies underneath. McCoy-Torres notes that sexualized dance styles such as daggering "nevertheless require a woman's consent

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and participation to properly complete" (197). Throughout the video, women's consent is made evident through their gaze, for before a partner attempts to dance behind her, she turns back to look, assess, and approve him before ultimately joining in (for the jockey scene, this occurs at two minutes and nine seconds). Further, daggering requires physical strength on behalf of the female participant, for she must bear the man's weight as he engages her body as prop (McCoy-Torres). As such, sexualized dancing and jockey symbology invoke power, both social and psychological, autonomy, and self-pleasure on behalf of the participants.

The tension of gendered labor and pleasure witnessed in the foreground is juxtaposed by the physical space: the city of Portmore, in which the video takes place, and the mural of Jamaican National Heroes that stands in the background. While the jockey image speaks to dancehall, it also links to sugar and banana production. Presently, Portmore is home to the only horseracing track in Jamaica: Caymanas Park. Caymanas Park owes its name to the Caymanas Estates Cayman also links to the Taino word, Caiman, meaning alligator, speaking to the settler colonial practices that made the Cayman Estates, Caymanas Park, and Jamaica as we know it, possible., three sugar producing estates that dominated St. Catherine Parish's agricultural production from the eighteenth through the late-nineteenth century (Jemmott 100). In contrast to the majority of Jamaica's parishes, St. Catherine was one of two where enslaved women outnumbered enslaved men by almost twenty to one, making enslaved women's bodies and labor vital for the enrichment of British planters, and thus, the legacy of the Caymanas Estates (Turner 50).

By the late nineteenth century, Caymanas Estates sold one of its properties, what would become present day Portmore, to the banana giant, the United Fruit Company (Jemmott 261). The UFCO's entrance into the Jamaican economy caused major shifts in gendered labor relations. As lower-class Black Jamaican men found opportunities for work outside of Jamaica, lower-class Black Jamaican women, who had primarily worked in agriculture, were now pushed into domestic service as a result of the expanding middle class (*Modern Blackness* 44). This change ultimately constrained Jamaican freedom, for as Deborah Thomas writes, "this restructuring disadvantageously incorporated black lower-class women more squarely within the colonial color, class, gender, and culture nexus in terms that devalued their customary political, economic, and sociocultural practices" (44).

Returning to "Fever," the mural of the National Heroes stands behind the dancers, yet, Nanny of the Maroons is missing from the frame. While George William Gordon is, too, missing, I'm reminded of Marjorie Williams' reaction (my Jamaican-American friend's mother) when I presented her the scene: "Those the National Heroes… but where Nanny!?" Nanny's absence was deeply felt. Given the relationship between the National Heroes and Jamaican nation-building projects, perhaps Nanny's absence speaks to the ways in which Jamaican national development post-independence has been built on the backs of Black women, given Nanny's own association with the welfare of women and children in the national imaginary (*National Heroes*). For example, the economic shift towards free market capitalism under Edward Sega decimated lower and working-class Jamaicans' access to basic services and social welfare. This impacted Black women most, as "the rising cost of living impos[ed] disproportionate burden on those with primary responsibility for the well-being of households and the care and socialization of children… [yet] during the 1980s… women ultimately displaced the traditional male working class" (Thomas 80). As the primary caretakers and contributors to the island's economic sector since enslavement, the "daggering," jockey position takes on layered meaning, pleasure, and violence.

Tokischa – Sistema de Patio

At one minute and four seconds, urban artist Treintisiete 3730, who raps the first half of "Sistema de Patio," sits down onto his couch as the camera removes him from view. Looking from above, the camera centers the objects on the ground between his feet, quickly adjusting in focus as Treintisiete lights a blunt before him. In the first scene, a *Nacho Dominicano 1* book lies at the center of the objects, framed by an empty baby bottle with another blunt overtop it, a handgun, and an empty beer bottle. Objects associated with violence, such as guns and bullets, are abundant throughout the video,

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emphasized further by Treintisiete's opening lyric, "este e el sistema de patio / se vende droga / se mueren chivato." "This is the system of the yard / Drugs are sold / Snitches die" translation mine. Violence is the system; the way things go. Thomas reminds us, however, that the proliferation of violence is not an inherent, cultural quality, but "an effect of class formation, a process that is imminently racialized and gendered (*Exceptional Violence* 4).

Surrounded by drugs, guns, and women in the earlier frames of the video, Treintisiete stands in as a tíguere, a hypermasculine performance of excess, whose violence is often at the expense of children, women, and anyone who dares cross him. This vulgar masculinity emerges from a long history of figures whose Blackness and class flexibility stood counter to the idealized, White masculinity of Dominican colonial and national order, such as the Creole, the formerly enslaved, the mulatto, and ultimately Rafael Trujillo (Ramírez 134). It was Trujillo's omnipotent, hypermasculine legacy – the brutal murders of dark-skinned Dominicans and Haitians during the Parsley massacre, sexual abuse against women and girls, and exceptional violence against any defectors to the dictatorship – that solidified the contemporary tíguere as "a vehicle for class-racial mobility" (Ramírez 135).

Returning to the scene, *Nacho Dominicano 1* is an elementary-level literacy book that forms part of a *Nacho Dominicano* series (Polanco). Created at the behest of Juan Bosch, former president whose democratization attempts in 1963 focused education reform, *Nacho Dominicano* would become a household name, for it was, and remains, formally assigned throughout all Dominican schools (Lilón 121). Additionally, *Nacho Dominicano 1* includes a teaching manual for educators and parents. The violent objects that surround *Nacho Dominicano 1*, then, speak less to an inherent violence characterizing Dominican culture, and Black masculinity specifically, and instead suggest the ways that violence is symbolically and literally taught by the Dominican government. This violence is then taught forward, as Treintisiete raps "Wilmer baja aonde Steven, que trajo una caja e tiro / La puse a mi manera y la menor bajó del kilo." "Wilmer, go down to Steven, he brought a box of bullets / I made her my way and she came down from the kilo" translation mine. As the scene shifts to Treintisiete lighting the blunt, violence becomes pleasure, for as Tokischa confirms at two minutes and four seconds, "Hay que arrebatase pa pode deconetase / Hay que metese un punto pa endrogase y relajase." "[You] have to get high to disconnect / [You] have to shoot up to get drugged up and relax" translation mine.

Sex work, too, runs the yard. At one minute and fifty-six seconds, Tokischa stands in front of a chalkboard that reads, "Sistema de Patio." Two women surround her, twerking on the floor as they face two tígueres in a way that visualizes oral sex. As children's bookbags hang on the walls, the classroom appears complete; learning has begun. Since the late-nineteenth century, Dominican nation-building projects construct idealized womanhood in the image of the nurturing mother and teacher, whose commitment to education, within and outside of the home, functioned to correct moral problems and, thus, promote "social uplift and national progress" (Mayes 119). Of these moral concerns was prostitution, often projected onto Black women's bodies and equated to a loss of national sovereignty.

Yet, in the mid-twentieth century, the Dominican Republic's economy transformed along neoliberal lines, the result of ex-president Joaquín Balaguer, who succeeded Juan Bosch, and U.S. intervention (Cabezas). Not only did this decrease lower and working-class Dominicans access to potable water and basic social services, it, ironically, created channels for international sex tourism that would, ultimately, become a means by which Dominicans, especially lower-class women, acquired much-needed resources and capital. Tokischa touches on her own entry into international sex tourism at the age of 16, taught to her by a cousin. See here at 24:17. Tokischa speaks to this dynamic at one minute forty seconds, rapping "Lo cuero no le maman guebo a pariguayo roto" "The hoes don't suck broke men's balls" translation mine. as someone holds a sign that reads "No mamo gratis." "I don't suck for free" translation mine.

As the scantily clad educator teaching kinds of sex work, Tokischa playfully blurs the boundaries between national respectability, degeneracy, and the home-as-classroom. Just as the

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proliferation of violence reflects a national inheritance, so too does sex work, not only as a result of twentieth century economic changes but in the ways that slavery used Black women's sexuality and reproduction as objects for profit. As Tokischa teaches the lesson forward, sex work becomes the way to make do, as well as the vehicle for enacting forms of pleasure. Rapping "Lo menore atienden punto pa comprase una cubana / En la escuela singan a la profe y le dan marihuana," "The youth run [drug] corners to buy a titty fuck / In school [they] fuck the teacher and give them marijuana" translation mine. sex work, drugs, and violence turn into networks of dependability and care, the system that makes the yard somewhat livable.

Bad Bunny – El Apagón

Released on the fifth anniversary of Hurricane María's landfall in Puerto Rico, "El Apagón" is an ode to Puerto Rico in all its pain and glory. At two minutes and twenty-seven seconds, as day shifts to night, hundreds of people rush in to party at the Guajataca Tunnel. Located in the northwest municipality of Isabela, the American Railroad Company built the Guajataca Tunnel in 1904, as part of its expansion of the Compañía de Ferrocarriles de Puerto Rico (*Compania de Ferrocarriles de Puerto Rico*). In the late nineteenth century, the Spanish built railways from the island's southern municipality of Ponce toward the capital of San Juan, in order to transport Spanish troops and military supplies throughout the island. Upon the United States' conquest of Puerto Rico in 1898, the federal government absorbed the Spanish railways under the American Railroad Company, building railways and tunnels from San Juan to the southwest municipality of Mayagüez. This served to connect the island's most prominent sugar-producing estates to San Juan's port, ship sugar into the U.S. mainland, and export products such as coffee and tobacco to Europe.

As Lisa Pierce Flores notes, the shift towards agricultural export rippled onto the island's economy, as local producers "could no longer negotiate with former trading partners individually" (79). With the U.S. becoming the largest consumer of Puerto Rican sugar, the cost of goods on the island rose dramatically, leaving the majority of locals in abject poverty. Given that sugar estates were originally Spanish plantations, the scene inside the Guajataca Tunnel links to both U.S. and Spanish colonialism. With contemporary peoples flooding into the space, time becomes non-linear, as the legacies of colonialism collapse onto the present moment. Puerto Rico remains a colony, as such, the past is, quite literally, an ongoing struggle of capital extraction.

This is emphasized lyrically, as someone begins to repeat, "me gusta la chocha de Puerto Rico." "I like Puerto Rico's pussy." At first glance, the lyric appears as vulgar nonsense, given that "chocha" is used freely in colloquial, Puerto Rican Spanish. In the context of the tunnel, which can also be read as a canal, Puerto Rico's "chocha" speaks to the ways in which the Caribbean symbolically, and literally, birthed the modern world and its attending, capitalist institutions. This birth is ongoing, it "repeats itself, unfolding and bifurcating until it reaches all the seas and lands of the earth," bridging the past of the plantation onto the now of daily life (Benítez Rojo 3). This birth was, and remains, nonetheless painful, yet, the use of "me gusta" invokes a paradoxical pleasure. To enjoy Puerto Rico's "chocha" is, perhaps, to find pleasure in birthing and being born of, plantation violence for, without it, Puerto Ricanness in all its pain and beauty, simply, would not exist.

This paradoxical pleasure is made visually evident, It is also affective, and somewhat unexplainable. As my friend Zabdiel, who lives on the island, said: "You have no idea how much this song dominated the bar scenes. You know we don't do a lot of electric stuff here… but once it hits that part, you can't help but jump and dance… me gusta la chocha de Puerto Rico! Me gusta la chocha de Puerto Rico!" as the song reaches its climax at two minutes and fifty-five seconds, and bodies burst into dance while singing along. In the context of Puerto Rico, this scene is technically vulgar, not for the "perreo" style of dancing where bodies grind onto one another, but because of the evident queerness. Queer and trans flags fly in the background of the scene, and the majority of dancers involved form part of "Laboratorio Boricua de Vogue," one of the island's ballroom communities (@__callmejo__). While the Puerto Rican government has, somewhat, made strides toward LGBTQ+ equality at the juridical level, to be queer and trans in Puerto Rico is nothing short of dangerous, for

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the legacies of Catholic coloniality that position heterosexuality as the ideal remain strong (La Fountain-Stokes 509).

Queer pleasure juxtaposed by the tunnel perhaps speaks to the paradox of "la chocha" through Puerto Rico's "political queerness." First proposed by Frances Negrón-Muntaner, political queerness suggests that, if queerness refers to the active choice of deviating from mainstream ideologies, Puerto Rico's continuous decision to remain a "Free Associated State," something between total independence and statehood, is akin to queerness (Lugo-Lugo 236). This ambivalent political stance does not negate the violence of U.S. colonialism, but instead allows for freedoms that neither full statehood nor independence could provide. In this way, the paradox of "la chocha" comes alive; to simultaneously love and hate being colonized and extracted from, to love and hate being Puerto Rican.

As the song returns to its chorus at three minutes and twenty-seven seconds, everyone joins in to sing, "Puerto Rico está bien cabrón." According to the Real Academia Española, "cabrón" is a vulgar word, signifying a person who does bad things ("Cabrón, Cabrona"). In Puerto Rican Spanish, however, "cabrón" can mean anything: an expression of frustration, the difficulty of an experience, something fantastic and enjoyable, and, even, a friendly greeting. Thus, "cabrón" can be read as both pain and pleasure, especially in the context of the tunnel. The use of "está" is also slippery. While "está" translates to "is" in English, Spanish has two forms of "is": one that implies an inherent, unchanging quality, "es," and one for temporary, mutable conditions, "está." In this way, the chorus implies what it means to be Puerto Rican, things are (conditionally) amazing, just as they are (conditionally) haunted by the past-present of colonialism. An alternate future is possible, but for now we remain in the paradox, joyfully singing along to that chorus, the "promise that this night might never end, that there is no world but this one, that everything is possible, that the reservoir of life is limitless" (Hartman 196). Amidst the unceasing violence, what else can we do but enjoy that vulgar ride?

Coda

Since childhood, I have loved music, especially Caribbean genres. When I was around five or six, I was gifted my first CD and instantly became obsessed with it: Elvis Crespo's *Suavemente*. I loved *Suavemente* so much that, sometime in first grade, I took the album to my Catholic school since, on Mondays, students could bring CDs to quietly play in the classroom while working. As I popped the disk into the player, and Crespo belted the opening line "¡Suavemente, besame!", my teacher immediately paused the song, confiscated the CD for the day, and said, "absolutamente no, esto es demasiado vulgar." "Absolutely not, this is extremely vulgar." I was confused, to say the least. "Vulgar?" I thought, "Isn't there more to this song than just… vulgarity? What's so bad about vulgarity, anyway?" This curiosity stuck with me, and as the case studies in this project demonstrate, vulgarity stands in for more than, simply, immoral excess.

The pedagogies of the vulgar highlight the ongoing hold that colonialism and plantation slavery have upon the Caribbean; the gendered extraction of labor and capital that produce the terrible circumstances by which Caribbean peoples experience daily life. As such, these pedagogies invert vulgarity onto itself, and ask us to reconsider what might actually be vulgar: sexual dance styles, for example, or the long-standing violence Western modernity inflicts upon, and is made possible through, the Caribbean? In so doing, these pedagogies bring the paradoxical beauty of violence to the fore; the ways that Caribbean peoples step into the vulgarity imposed onto them, and create forms of livingness and pleasure amidst their constrained freedom. To turn the unfortunate into something beautiful, what could be more Caribbean than that?

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