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Kim Kattari

2009

Musicological Explorations

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Original citation:

Kattari, K. (2009). Building Pan-Latino unity in the United States through music: An exploration of commonalities between salsa and reggaeton. *Musicological Explorations*, 10, 105–136. <https://journals.uvic.ca/index.php/me/article/view/149>

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Building Pan-Latino Unity in the United States through Music: An Exploration of Commonalities Between Salsa and Reggaeton

Kim Kattari

Standing amongst 6200 people in the packed Los Angeles Gibson Universal Amphitheatre, it became undeniably clear to me that reggaeton¹ had made its way into the popular music mainstream. The first annual *Invasión del Reggaeton* (“Reggaeton Invasion”) tour hit Los Angeles with two sold-out nights on April 30 and May 1, 2005. This concert featured many of reggaeton’s top superstars, straight from Puerto Rico and other Caribbean islands: Ivy Queen, Daddy Yankee, Hector “El Bambino,” Luny Tunes, Glory, Don Omar, and many others. A variety of the Latino populations of Southern California came out to “represent” at this momentous concert: Mexicans, Puerto Ricans, Hondurans, Salvadorans, Colombians, Cubans, Dominicans, and Venezuelans. Many of the attendees wore clothes stitched together from their country’s national flag or used body paint to display pride in their particular Latin American country of origin by decorating themselves with their national colours and symbols. Each group was there to stake a claim in the reggaeton movement.

This overt nationalistic spirit was not competitive, however, but cooperative. There was an overwhelming sense that everyone in the audience had one important thing in common: their tremendous

¹ Pronounced “reggae-TONE;” also sometimes spelled “reggaetón” or “reguetón.”

love for reggaeton, derived from their shared Latino² heritage. Tearing down long-held animosities between Puerto Ricans and Mexicans,³ the Puerto Rican stars of reggaeton paid tribute to Mexican and Mexican-American culture: Daddy Yankee appeared in a Mexican soccer jersey, Ivy Queen praised Mexican rocker Alejandra Guzmán and late Tejano star Selena, and a band of mariachis accompanied Don Omar. The enthusiastic fans that night made it clear that reggaeton had brought together a diverse array of Los Angeles' young Latino population, despite their differences and despite reggaeton's primary association with Puerto Rico.

Reggaeton hit the United States like an explosion in 2004 and has continued to grow in popularity all over the United States, Puerto Rico, Cuba and in many other countries. It has emerged as a commercially successful genre that appeals to audiences across national borders, leading *L.A. Times* staff writer Agustín Gurza to point out that, "this rowdy and often raunchy dance music has spread like a riot

² Throughout this article, I use the phrase "Latino" to refer to people living in the United States who trace their ancestry to Mexico, Caribbean, Central, or South American countries. I reserve the term "Latin American" to refer specifically to Spanish-speaking countries outside of the United States and the populations that reside therein.

³ This animosity between Puerto Ricans and Mexicans is particularly evident in Los Angeles, where the two ethnic groups frequently compete for living space and employment opportunities. But these tensions are evident in other parts of the country as well; for instance, anthropologist Arlene Dávila traces this conflict in New York City in *Barrio Dreams: Puerto Ricans, Latinos, and the Neoliberal City* (2004).

through the youth culture of Latin America, from the streets of San Juan to the nightclubs of Santiago de Chile, Hollywood and East L.A.”⁴ In the United States, reggaeton songs have been on the Top 10 of the “Hot Latin Songs” Billboard charts practically every week, and many have hit the overall Top 200 chart which tracks album sales (including digital) of all genres.⁵ Moreover, because of reggaeton’s popularity, Latin music is one of the only genres in recent years to experience an increase in record sales while the overall music industry has been crippled by internet downloading.⁶

⁴ Agustín Gurza, “A Rowdy Sound Leaves Salsa Behind on the Dance Floor,” *Los Angeles Times*, April 30, 2005, A1.

⁵ For example, Daddy Yankee’s 2005 album *Barrio Fino*, which sold more than 1.6 million copies in the United States alone, peaked at #1 on Top Latin Albums, #26 on The Billboard 200 and #16 on Top Rap Albums; his live album *Barrio Fino: En Directo* [CD/DVD] hit #1 on Latin, #24 on the Top 200 and #6 on Rap; and his 2007 album *El Cartel: The Big Boss* did even better, hitting #1 on both Top Latin and Top Rap and #9 on the Billboard 200. Don Omar is another reggaeton artist who has charted high on all three lists; for instance, his 2006 *King of Kings* album topped the Latin Album chart at #1, Rap Albums at #2 and the Top 200 at #7. These are just a few examples to give a sense of the cross-over success of reggaeton songs in the U.S. It should be noted that reggaeton has continued to frequently appear on these charts ever since 2004. As I write this article, Daddy Yankee’s soundtrack album for *Talento de Barrio* is listed on the Top 10 Latin Chart and has peaked at #13 on The Billboard 200.

⁶ In general, Americans bought 48 million fewer albums in 2005 than in 2004 (a 3.9% decrease), yet sales of Latin music went up (Corbett). There was a 16.4% increase in Latin music sales from 2003 to 2004, and another 12.6% increase on top of that the next year (Avanzini 51).

I argue that reggaeton's popularity partly stems from its ability to pull together a pan-Latino audience in the United States, a diverse and assorted group of ethnicities who trace their heritage to a variety of Latin American countries. But this marketing technique is not new. To trace the roots of this phenomenon, we must look to salsa. Salsa has reached Latino and non-Latino audiences worldwide, becoming the most internationally recognized style of Latin music. As Felix Padilla notes, "it has been mythologized and marked as a defining cultural characteristic of Latino consciousness and unity."⁷ This statement was echoed on the back of a recent salsa compilation: "Short, sharp, sweet and straight to the point, salsa has come to define Latin life – the music, the dancing, the culture."⁸ In other words, salsa became synonymous with a pan-Latin identity, setting a precedent that reggaeton would draw on in order to construct its own success decades later.

This article investigates how these two particular styles of music have come to define pan-Latino identity in the U.S., particularly through the way in which these genres highlight commonalities between the fans' individual Latin American countries of heritage. Latino groups in the United States that trace their ancestry to Mexico, Caribbean, Central, or South American countries have been brought together by

⁷ Felix M. Padilla, "Salsa Music as a Cultural Expression of Latino Consciousness and Unity," *Hispanic Journal of Behavioral Sciences* 11.1 (February 1989): 39.

⁸ Rough Guide liner notes, *The Rough Guide to Salsa Music*, Rough Guides, 1998.

salsa and reggaeton through the development of a pan-Latino community centred around the enjoyment of these musical styles. In order to explore this development, I address why salsa and reggaeton are both musically pre-disposed to act as hybrid pan-Latino symbols of identity and I demonstrate how the production of the music and lyrics of both of these genres was at least partly commercially motivated to reach the widest possible audience. Finally, I suggest that two common lyrical themes are key to the pan-Latino popularity of both genres. First, salsa and reggaeton each originated in marginalized, urban communities, so their songs address issues that are relevant for *barrio* (urban neighbourhood) communities across Latin America and Latino communities in the United States. Second, both genres explicitly express a desire for pan-Latino solidarity through lyrical references. Both of these musical genres thus strategically reach a pan-Latino audience, particularly in the United States where different Latin American groups reside in close proximity to each other, by highlighting the commonalities between different Latin American ethnicities. This has led to the development not only of a pan-Latino audience, but a sense of pan-Latino pride and identity centred around participation in these musical styles.

Development of Salsa from Cuba to New York to Venezuela: The Musical Hybridity Model for Reggaeton

Perhaps because the very nature of salsa is so difficult to define, music scholars, academics, musicians, and audiences have frequently debated the origins of the

music. In fact, Marisol Berríos-Miranda notes that the last few decades have witnessed an intensely antagonistic battle between Cuba and Puerto Rico for the claim to salsa's origins.⁹ Most academics can agree, however, that there is truth to both claims: salsa has unmistakable roots in Cuban *son* and *clave* patterns, while Puerto Rican musicians have been undeniably fundamental to the development of salsa in New York. Due to years of cultural contact between the two nations, Puerto Rican musicians incorporated many Cuban rhythms into their own repertoire. Peter Manuel suggests that these Cuban styles of music had already become internationalized and absorbed into various Latin American cultures: "The ultimately Cuban origin of the modernized *son*, *guaracha*, and *bolero* was not perceived as a contradiction [to the Puerto Rican claim on salsa], since these genres came to be effectively re-signified as pan-Latino music."¹⁰ As Kenneth Bilby points out, fusions of music occur frequently in the Caribbean area due to the polymusicality of individuals: they "acquire competence in more than one tradition," allowing them to "move across the stylistic continuum with no

⁹ Marisol Berríos-Miranda, "Con Sabor a Puerto Rico?: The Reception and Influence of Puerto Rican Salsa in Venezuela," in *Musical Migrations: Transnationalism and Cultural Hybridity in Latin/o America*, ed. Frances R. Aparicio and Cándida F. Jáquez (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), 51-2.

¹⁰ Peter Manuel, "Puerto Rican Music and Cultural Identity: Creative Appropriation of Cuban Sources from Danza to Salsa," *Ethnomusicology* 38.2 (Spring 1994): 267.

sense of discomfort or disjointedness.”¹¹ Thus, long before salsa became internationally popular, the key Latin rhythms on which it was based, particularly those from Cuba, had already experienced a degree of pan-Latinization throughout the Caribbean, Central, and South America.

Over time, Puerto Rican musicians began to regard the traditional Cuban musical genres as their own, especially as they added their own distinct characteristics to the music, soon becoming some of the most prominent salsa innovators. Jorge Duany draws attention to the traditional Puerto Rican influences on salsa music, noting that Puerto Rican musicians not only adopted the *son*, *guaracha*, *rumba*, and *bolero* from Cuba, but also incorporated several musical traditions of their own, including the *seis*, *bomba*, and *plena*.¹² Additionally, Marisol Berríos-Miranda’s research documents the Puerto Rican influence on the development of salsa in Venezuela. Many of her informants were inspired by Rafael Cortijo and Ismael Rivera’s salsa style which incorporated traditional Puerto Rican genres:

Cortijo and Ismael Rivera’s fusion of *bombas* and *plenas* with Cuban genres was not only compelling stylistically, but served as a model for the inclusion of Afro-Venezuelan music in their own salsa repertoire, and ultimately helped

¹¹ Kenneth Bilby, “The Caribbean as a Musical Region,” in *Caribbean Contours*, ed. Sidney Mintz and Sally Price (Washington D.C.: John Hopkins University Press, 1985), 203.

¹² Jorge Duany, “Popular Music in Puerto Rico: Toward an Anthropology of ‘Salsa,’” *Latin American Music Review* 5.2 (Fall 1984): 186-216.

pave the way for salsa to become the pan-Latino music of today.¹³

My intent is not to take sides in the Puerto Rican-Cuban debate about the origins of salsa, but rather to point out that diverse stylistic elements from a number of nations have been integral to the pan-Latin musical nature of the genre. Because there are many assorted musical influences, people steeped in different national traditions will recognize some aspect of salsa's musical characteristics, and thus a wide range of people can be attracted to the genre.

Reggaeton is fraught with similar origin debates. With reggae and dancehall beats from Jamaica, *reggae-español* from Panama, hip-hop influences from the United States, Spanish rap from Puerto Rico, traditional and modern Latin American genres like *salsa*, and Afro-Caribbean styles like *bomba*, reggaeton is truly a musical fusion, leading James Farber of the NY Daily News to refer to it as a "cultural polyglot."¹⁴ It is the epitome of a transnational music, with influences migrating back and forth between countries and influencing new productions. Essentially, reggaeton is the combined result of two simultaneous histories: the production of Spanish-language dancehall and reggae in Panama based on covers of songs from Jamaica, and the development of Spanish-language rap in Puerto Rico based on covers of rap songs from the United States as well as original productions on the island. In Puerto Rico, these blends fused with other

¹³ Berríos-Miranda, 61.

¹⁴ Evan Bailyn, "Reggaeton," Music of Puerto Rico, <http://www.musicofpuertorico.com/index.php/genre/reggaeton/>.

musical elements, and by the early 1990s, “reggaeton” became recognized as its own distinct genre with clearly transnational musical characteristics.

Furthermore, the unmistakable, synthesized, bass-driven “boom-ch-boom-chick” beat (see Figure 1) that characterizes reggaeton is itself a transnational Caribbean rhythm. It is most often based on the repeated interaction between a bass drum on beats 1 and 3 of a 4/4 measure and the *tresillo* (three-note group) part of a *clave* rhythm (see Figure 2) played by a sampled snare drum.

Figure 1: Basic reggaeton beat

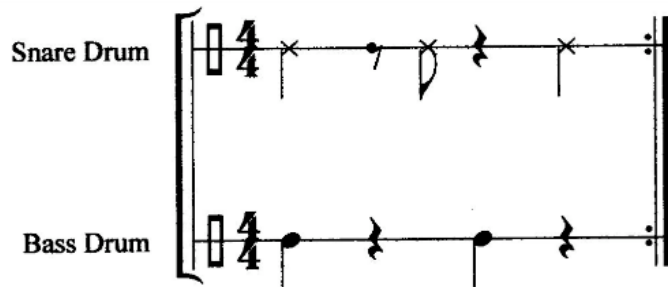


Figure 2: Basic *clave* pattern with the *tresillo* pattern, the basis of the reggaeton rhythm snare section, shown in the first measure



This *clave*-derived reggaeton beat, which is practically identical to the *habanera* rhythm, has roots in many Afro-Puerto Rican and Afro-Cuban rhythms, like those used in *bomba*, *plena*, *seis*, and *tango-congo* music, to

name just a few.¹⁵ The *habanera* rhythm has been used in a variety of musics throughout the Caribbean, Mexico, and South America, so the use of this familiar rhythmic pattern in reggaeton is yet another reason why this genre appeals to people from a variety of different Latin American backgrounds.

Although the relationship of this beat to traditional Latin American rhythms is clear, most reggaeton musicians trace the beat back to the exact one used in Jamaican dancehall artist Shabba Ranks' "Dem Bow" ("They Bow") song from his 1991 album *Just Reality*. This electronically-produced dance song, with a catchy beat produced by Bobby "Digital" Dixon, circulated throughout clubs and dancehalls in Jamaica, Panama, Puerto Rico, and many other Caribbean and Latin American countries, eventually becoming the foundation for reggaeton music in Puerto Rico. Although the basic reggaeton beat can be traced back to Bobby Dixon's dancehall rhythm, it nevertheless does evoke a particularly Afro-Latin, pan-Caribbean sound, probably due to Jamaica's own multicultural background, a Caribbean mix of European, African, and indigenous traditions. Indeed, Wayne Marshall notes that "the same [*clave*] subdivision that cuts compellingly across a steady 4/4 pulse can be heard and felt in Jamaican reggae and *mento*, Trinidadian *soca*

¹⁵ See Robin Moore 1997 for more information on how the *habanera* rhythm was used in stylized Afro-Cuban *tango-congo* music during the 1930s and 1940s. John Amira and Stephen Cornelius provide valuable insight into the ways in which West African *clave* patterns have been used throughout Latin American rhythms. I demonstrate in much more detail how the reggaeton beat is similar to Afro-Puerto Rican rhythms in Kattari 2006.

and *calypso*, Haitian *meringue* and *konpa*, Puerto Rican *bomba* and *plena*, Dominican *merengue* and *bachata*, Cuban *son* and *mambo*, and, among others, Nuyorican *salsa*.¹⁶ Combined with influences from Panamanian and American music as well, reggaeton can easily attract listeners from a wide pan-Latino market due to its hybrid musical characteristics.

Salsa and reggaeton musicians clearly both drew on established pan-Latino and transnational musical characteristics, but this process wasn't completely accidental. Soon, the musical hybridity of salsa became a selling point, a strategy reggaeton uses today. Thanks to salsa's popularity among Puerto Rican musicians in New York, the Fania record label emerged as the dominant enterprise behind the commercialization of the music. Jerry Masucci, the President of Fania Records, was initially responsible for the ensuing pan-Latinization of salsa, for it was under his direction that an attempt was made to further diversify the music in order to appeal to the widest possible pan-Latino audience, especially in the United States (New York, in particular). Masucci only demanded that musicians retain the standard salsa *clave* rhythm but had free reign to experiment with other pan-Latino sounds and lyrics: "The idea was to make Latino salsa reflect the wide variation of Latin American cultures and social experiences as a way to better sell it in these potential markets."¹⁷ Thus, while salsa followed a generalized Latin formula, it also allowed for the incorporation of different regional influences. This strategy of

¹⁶ Wayne Marshall, "The Rise of Reggaeton," *The Phoenix*, January 19, 2006, http://www.thephoenix.com/article_ektid1595.aspx.

¹⁷ Padilla, 36.

simultaneously prioritizing diversity while forging a common sound increased the pan-Latino appeal, as Marisol Berríos-Miranda notes:

By capitalizing on musical elements and concepts that are spread throughout the Caribbean and Latin America, salsa has become a common musical denominator among Latino/as and at the same time, its flexibility with respect to the inclusion of distinctive local genres and the reflection of the musical variety that exists among Latino people has permitted people of different nationalities to regard salsa as their own.¹⁸

Accordingly, as salsa was marketed as the definitive expression of Latin American and Latino music and culture, it became a syncretic pan-Latino musical genre.

Reggaeton promoters and artists have used a similar strategy to guarantee a broad listening base. Once reggaeton established its presence in the popular music industry with its basic but irresistible bass-thumping beat, producers and artists began to incorporate even more diverse sources into their music. While reggaeton is basically a combination of reggae-dancehall and hip-hop, the musical influences are really much more complicated than this simple equation implies. “Over the years reggaeton has developed a little bit of everything, salsa, *cumbia*, reggae – that’s the way we have captured such a wide audience,” says Daddy Yankee, one of the most

¹⁸ Berríos-Miranda, 56.

successful platinum-selling artists of the genre.¹⁹ Tego Calderón, known as one of the most innovative reggaeton artists, took it a step further:

When I first started with all these salsa elements, and this different style of flow, everyone criticized me, and laughed at me, saying I was crazy. After the first record, I included drums, *bomba*, salsa, and now more people are open to experiment, and the same people that critiqued me are now following my trend.²⁰

I argue that reggaeton, like salsa before it, became extremely popular among a pan-Latino audience in the United States specifically because of its musical hybridity. Since there are musical influences from an array of Latin American cultures, different Latino groups will each find something in the music to enjoy and appreciate. Furthermore, this musical diversity has been a conscious effort on the part of the music industry to reach the widest possible audience while more specific Latin music genres, such as *ranchera*, *norteño*, *tejano*, or *mariachi* lend themselves only to regionally or culturally specific audiences, while other Latin genres don't actually sound very "Latin" at all. For instance, Leila Cobo attributes *rock en español's* commercial stagnation to its similarity with mainstream music:

¹⁹ Laura Emerick, "Reggaeton comes up from the underground," *Chicago Sun-Times*, March 13, 2005, <http://slumz.boxden.com/showthread.php?t=227604>.

²⁰ "Tego Calderón is the King of 'Reggaeton,'" *MSNBC*, October 26, 2004, <http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/6339822/>.

Latin rock too often sounds like British or American rock, but in Spanish. This in itself isn't bad; the music and lyrics can be compelling, in any language. But in the United States, where fans have the option of not only buying but seeing and experiencing music in English, performed by groups that are promoted via outlets like MTV, the competition is tough.... Reggaeton, meanwhile, has a unique sound, distinct from the rap and hip-hop made in the United States.²¹

In fact, the target audience for reggaeton in the United States is Latino youth from about 12 to 20 years old, a generation that has been raised on a mix of their parents' salsa or Latin regional music and the mainstream hip-hop that they are accustomed to hearing in urban neighbourhoods.²² Reggaeton's marketing strategy is to combine these two interests, giving the next wave of Latino youth something unique to call their own. Distinguished journalist and author Jorge Ramos notes that reggaeton:

is not the hip-hop or rap of the African-American, or the mainstream rock of the WASP, or their grandparents' tropical swing, or the Julio Iglesias or Raphael of their parents, or

²¹ Leila Cobo, "Reggaeton is More Popular Than Rock, Salsa and Merengue," *Ahorre*, April 20, 2005, http://www.ahorre.com/musica/archives/2005/04/reggaeton_is_mo_1.html.

²² When I ask reggaeton fans what they listened to before reggaeton, they invariably mention hip-hop first. They seem embarrassed to add they also like salsa, *marachi*, *ranchera*, or some other genre of Latin American music. Nevertheless, it demonstrates how reggaeton fans have typically been steeped in both Latino and American popular music cultures.

even the Paulina, Sanz and Luis Miguel of their older siblings. It is something that is new and different.²³

In other words, reggaeton followed salsa's model of musical hybridity to strategically connect with a pan-Latino youth market in the United States by appealing to a variety of Latin American sounds and styles.

Salsa Speaks to a Pan-Latino Audience: The Lyrical Model for Reggaeton

I have demonstrated that salsa has become one of the most internationally popular and well-known Latin American music genres partly because it was commercially designed to reach a pan-Latino audience through musical hybridity and strategic marketing, setting a precedent for the recent reggaeton explosion among a similarly diverse Latino audience in the United States. While musical hybridity is one aspect of the pan-Latino appeal of both salsa and reggaeton, both genres also feature song lyrics that directly address pan-Latino issues, infusing the community with a sense of solidarity that comes from an understanding of other Latino cultures that live in the United States. While many of the following examples refer to a variety of Latin American and Caribbean countries, I argue that the development of a pan-Latino sense of pride is most strongly felt in the United States, where Latinos from different Latin American origins are in frequent contact with each other. Reggaeton, as with salsa before it, has been

²³ Jorge Ramos, "Reggaeton 909's Gasoline," *Univision*, March 7, 2005, <http://www.jorgeramos.com/english/english030705.htm>.

influential in instilling this sense of pan-Latino pride by identifying, acknowledging, and highlighting the common concerns of various Latin American groups, leading Latinos in the U.S. to understand themselves as part of a pan-Latino group, connected by a common heritage and identity.

One theme in many salsa and reggaeton songs that identifies common pan-Latino concerns is a focus on *barrio* (urban neighbourhood) life. After developing in Cuba and Puerto Rico, salsa rose to immense popularity in New York's Puerto Rican *barrio* enclaves, soon becoming, as Duany puts it, "the unmistakable voice of the Puerto Rican *barrio*."²⁴ Mayra Santos-Febres agrees that salsa is the quintessential expression of New York's *barrio* culture but adds that "this *barrio* is not only in New York, but in Caracas, Santurce, Medellín, Santo Domingo, and in every [Spanish-speaking] Caribbean industrial center"²⁵ because people in *barrios* across the nation and Latin America experience similar problems, difficulties, and identities. As the lyrics of salsa gradually evolved from songs specifically about New York's Puerto Rican *barrio* into more general topics about *barrio* life, the genre was able to appeal to people from a variety of Latino communities in Latin America and the United States.

²⁴ Duany, 198.

²⁵ Mayra Santos-Febres, "Salsa as Translocation," in *Everynight Life: Culture and Dance in Latin/o America*, ed. Celeste Fraser Delgado and Jose Esteban Munoz (Durham: Duke University Press, 1997), 181.

For instance, Santos-Febres provides a comparison of a traditional Puerto Rican *plena*²⁶ “Tragedía en Barrio Obrero” (“Tragedy in *Barrio Obrero*, ‘the Worker’s Neighbourhood’”) with Willie Colón’s salsa song “Calle Luna, Calle Sol” (“Moon Street, Sun Street”) to demonstrate how salsa expanded its discussion of *el barrio* to make it identifiable for people all over Latin America and the United States:

In the plena song by Los Pleneros del Quinto Olivo are detailed descriptions of the event (a plane crash), including the exact time (6:45 P.M.) and place (Barrio Obrero, between Borinquen and Barbosa Avenues). In Colón’s salsa song, however, the mention of streets refers to a topos: a barrio de *guapos* [bullies], where tough young men hang out. It then proceeds to describe this type of setting and to advise the listener-audience-interlocutor about how life is on the streets and how to deal with it. Thus even though Calle Luna and Calle Sol are two streets that really do exist in Old San Juan, P.R., in this song they could be anywhere; their names (Moon and Sun Streets) manage to evoke a space that is almost mythic.²⁷

“Calle Luna, Calle Sol” gives general advice to anyone living in a *barrio*, whether it is in New York, Puerto Rico, Los Angeles, or any other Latino neighbourhood. Instead of retelling specific stories about a particular neighbourhood, salsa songs began

²⁶ *Plena* is a folkloric urban genre of music from Puerto Rico, traditionally used to transmit information, gossip, and news, earning the nickname “*el periódico cantado*” (“the sung newspaper”).

²⁷ Santos-Febres, 183.

to refer more frequently to general and topical *barrio* situations that could be identifiable across city, state, and national boundaries, thus enhancing its pan-Latino appeal.

Likewise, key reggaeton artists have highlighted the fact that the genre was born of the streets, identifying the music with any locale that has an urban *barrio* community. Daddy Yankee's 2004 album *Barrio Fino*, which reached #1 on the Latin Billboard chart, includes several songs that characterize the realities of the Puerto Rican *barrio* in which the singer grew up. The minute-long opening track is in fact a monologue by Daddy Yankee describing the *barrio* in which he was born and raised:

<i>Yo que soy quien soy a mi manera.</i>	I am who I am, in my own way,
<i>Del barrio, pero de barrio fino,</i>	From the barrio, but a fine barrio,
<i>como mi gente</i>	like my people,
<i>gente que lucha</i>	people who fight,
<i>gente que siente.</i>	people who feel.
<i>Yo no soy de un barrio a la deriva</i>	I'm not from an adrift barrio
<i>sin destino</i>	
<i>No, yo soy del barrio, pero de un</i>	No, I'm from the barrio, but a
<i>barrio fino.²⁸</i>	fine one.

His lyrics are general enough to allow anyone living in a *barrio* to identify with this sense of pride, allowing the music to reach the broadest possible urban demographic. Cesar Ochoa, an independent Latin

²⁸ Selected lyrics from Track 1 ("Intro"), Daddy Yankee, *Barrio Fino*, VI Music, 2004. Translated by the author, with thanks to Joe Gomez for proofreading all the lyrical translations in this article.

music promoter, notes that this music clearly speaks to many people, demonstrated by the fact that Daddy Yankee's debut album went gold and platinum so quickly: "To have someone come out of *barrios* of Puerto Rico to sell nearly a million copies in the U.S. and Puerto Rico alone without significant radio airplay at first, that in itself tells a story about how relevant this music is."²⁹

Reggaeton star Tego Calderón also draws on this portrayal of a *barrio* subculture that could be located in any city in the United States or Latin America. Journalist Tom Pryor explores Tego's connection to his salsa roots to understand his use of *barrio* imagery:

[Tego] also appropriated salsa's old connection to the street, writing funny, insightful rhymes about everyday life that endeared him to Puerto Ricans... With his sleepy, laid-back flow Calderón told *stories*, slice of life vignettes, just like Hector Lavoe and Ismael Miranda and the other great salseros did back in the day.³⁰

In fact, Tego explicitly stated in an interview that he wants to address issues that afflict all *barrios*, not just those in Puerto Rico:

Yes, I'm from Rio Grande and was brought up in Rio Piedras and Carolina, but I don't have a *barrio*. I'm from all the poor *barrios* and all the people that support me, rich neighbourhoods, all *barrios*... That's why my music is understood by a Colombian and a Dominican, even though

²⁹ Emerick.

³⁰ Tom Pryor, "Tego Calderón's Reggaeton Revolution," *Global Rhythm*, December 2004, 33.

the slang that is used is from Puerto Rico. It's the same worries in different countries, the same problems.³¹

This genre derives from the same heritage as salsa – a pan-Latino identification with, and pride in, working-class *barrio* culture. This is why people are attracted to reggaeton, as one San Juan club-goer expresses: “Some of the songs have words that are maybe not moralistic, but some talk about what life is really about.”³² The representations of *barrio* life that each genre paints are valid throughout Latino neighbourhoods across the United States, contributing to the tremendous pan-Latino appeal and success of both salsa and reggaeton.

Furthermore, many salsa and reggaeton songs explicitly discuss pan-Latino solidarity, adding another factor to the wide marketability of each genre. Salsa's pan-Latino attitudes are best portrayed through lyrics that express a desire to unify Latinos despite national, political, regional, and cultural differences. For instance, in her 1981 song “Latinos en Estados Unidos” (“Latinos in the United States”), Celia Cruz asserts pride in her Latin American heritage:

I'm Latin American, don't be afraid to say it,
For we're all brothers in a different country.³³

She finishes the song by calling for Latino unity in the U.S.:

³¹ Ed Morales, “El Public Enemy,” *Urban Latino*, June 2004, 52.

³² Matt Wells, “Puerto Rico shakes to a new beat,” *BBC News*, March 7, 2005, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/Americas/4304185.stm>.

³³ Lyrics quoted in Padilla, 36.

Don't discriminate against your brothers;
Whenever you can
offer him your hand.
Latin America, you live in me,
I want this message to reach you.
We must unite so that you can see that we're
united;
We'll win the fight.³⁴

Rubén Blades, a Panamanian salsa singer-composer famous throughout Latin America and the United States, also composed many salsa songs that directly call for pan-Latino unity, often in adamantly political contexts. For instance, in his 1978 song "Plástico" ("Plastic"), Blades persuades Latinos to work together so that the entire Latino group can move "always forward to finish together," echoing Celia Cruz's point in "Latinos en Estados Unidos" that "a unified people will be respected and given value."³⁵ Willie Colón's 1990 album *Color Americano* ("American Color") includes further examples of salsa songs that evoke the experiences of being Latino in the United States and encourage the development of pan-Latino unity.

In a similar vein, reggaeton artists have striven to decrease the hostilities between different Latino nationalities in the U.S. by calling attention to their similarities. For instance, "Oye Mi Canto," one of the most popular songs to hit the U.S. in 2004, offers a simple, catchy chorus that makes it clear that many different Latino groups should come together to enjoy the song:

³⁴ Lyrics quoted in Padilla, 37.

³⁵ Padilla, 42.

<i>Boriqua, Morena</i>	Puerto Rican, Dark-Skinned woman,
<i>Dominicano, Columbiano</i>	Dominican, Columbian Puerto Rican, Dark-Skinned woman
<i>Boriqua, Morena</i>	Rican, Dark-Skinned woman
<i>Cubano, Mexicano</i>	Cuban, Mexican
<i>Oye Mi Canto</i>	Hear my song ³⁶

In other words, all Latinos are allowed to participate in this song together, no matter the country of origin, allowing a diverse pan-Latino audience to feel united through song, dance, and music. This message of common identification is made clear in Spanish, English, and even Spanglish throughout the song: “*Todos mis Latinos en El Bloke ahora stand up*” (“All my Latinos on the block stand up now”) is followed in English by “No matter your race because you know you’re Latino.”³⁷ Individual nationalities and skin colours clearly do not prevent one from joining the more general “Latino” category. The corresponding music video for “Oye Mi Canto” gives equal representation to all Spanish-speaking nations³⁸ by displaying a scantily clad woman from each country dressed in a bikini decorated with her national colors and symbols dancing seductively on the beach underneath her nation’s waving flag. Rappers Daddy Yankee and N.O.R.E. wear oversized T-shirts hand-painted with the flags of every Spanish-speaking country. The implicit message portrayed in this video is that all Latinos can enjoy reggaeton together and

³⁶ *Boriqua* (often spelled *Boricua*) is a term many Puerto Ricans and Puerto Rican Americans use to identify themselves.

³⁷ Selected lyrics from N.O.R.E., “Oye Mi Canto,” *Oye Mi Canto / 4 a Minute*, Def Jam, 2004. Lyrics translated by the author.

³⁸ In this music video, Portuguese-speaking Brazil is included as well.

feel pride in their common Latin American heritage. This works particularly well in the United States, allowing Latinos to understand that they share a general Latin American heritage with members of the other Latino ethnic groups that they frequently encounter, particularly at reggaeton concerts or in reggaeton-related web forums, thus playing an important part in the development of a pan-Latino identity that includes all Spanish-speaking people in the U.S.

While women embody the common pan-Latino heritage in the “Oye Mi Canto” music video, the video for Don Omar’s 2005 hit song “Reggaeton Latino” is more concerned with representing a common Latin American history applicable to those living in the U.S. who trace their ancestry to a variety of Latin American countries. As Don Omar encourages people to “*sientan el poder del reggaeton latino*” (“feel the power of Latino reggaeton”), key images from Latin American history flash on the screen including snapshots of Tito Puente, César Chávez, Che Guevara, Fidel Castro, Diego Rivera, Frida Kahlo, and famous sports legends from a variety of nationalities. In the “*Reggaeton Latino Chosen Few*” remix, Dominican American rap-reggaeton duo LDA draws on the shared history and heritage to compel Latinos to unite through the reggaeton movement:

Ésta es nuestra herencia Latina, la voz que representa nuestra raza cósmica. Y que me oigan en las vigas, El Reggaeton Latino se queda. Pa’ que lo bailen desde España a Sud América, El Reggaeton Latino se queda. En los Estados Unidos y Centro América, El Reggaeton Latino se queda. Sientan el poder del Reggaeton Latino.... El reggaeton se a convertido en la identificación

de los Latinos y “Los Pocos Elegidos” son los preferidos, los encargados de mantenerlo a los Latinos unidos.

This is our Latino heritage, the voice that represents our cosmic race. And so they hear me in the rafters, Reggaeton Latino is here to stay. So they dance to it from Spain to South America, Reggaeton Latino is here to stay. In the United States and Central America, Reggaeton Latino is here to stay. Feel the power of Reggaeton Latino.... Reggaeton is becoming the identification of Latino and The Chosen Few³⁹ are the preferred ones, the ones entrusted to sustain the united Latinos.⁴⁰

Thus, like the groundbreaking salsa songs that were popular decades earlier, both “Oye Mi Canto” and “Reggaeton Latino” express a desire for Latino unity by appealing to shared musical interests, heritage, history, and goals. Again, while these lyrics frequently address the transnational Latin American community, the growth of pan-Latino pride is best understood in the United States; these lyrics help foster an awareness of shared concerns and a common heritage among the various Latino groups that participate in reggaeton in the States.

³⁹ The “Chosen Few” commonly refers to Tego Calderón, Daddy Yankee, and Don Omar, three of the most popular reggaeton superstars in the early 2000s. In the video, they are compared to Fidel Castro, Che Guevara, and Diego Rivera in terms of their importance for the Latino cause.

⁴⁰ Selected lyrics from Don Omar, “Reggaeton Latino Chosen Few Remix,” *Don Omar Da Hitman Presents Reggaeton Latino*, VI Music, 2005. Lyrics translated by the author.

Conclusion

Admittedly, the main characteristics of salsa and reggaeton presented here do not represent a comprehensive study of their pan-Latino suitability. Entire studies have been devoted to salsa's popularity around the world, for instance in London, Colombia, and Venezuela.⁴¹ In this article, I specifically wanted to direct focus onto some of the commonalities between the ways in which salsa and reggaeton have both become important signifiers of pan-Latino identity, particularly for the variety of Latin American communities throughout the United States. These genres, made by and for Latinos, have specifically crafted this pan-Latino sense of pride and identity consciousness through musical hybridity, strategic marketing, description of a general *barrio* culture, and overt demand for Latino unity, making both genres relevant for people in the United States from a variety of Latin American origins.

As a result of this pan-Latino production and marketing, reggaeton has fostered an awareness of pan-Latino solidarity among Latino youth. Like salsa, reggaeton is one of the few Spanish-language musical genres in the United States that appeals to Latinos from all different nationalities. It has drawn together a large, diverse audience, as indicated by strong gold and platinum album sales and its constant presence on Billboard charts. Additionally, the shared experience of being at concerts, buying the music, sharing the music, and discussing it on web forums further

⁴¹ See Román-Velázquez, Waxer, and Berríos-Miranda for studies of salsa in these locations.

contributes to the development of a sense of pan-Latino pride. This is a musical genre that clearly brings a variety of Latino groups together through their enjoyment and appreciation of the music, allowing different Latino groups to see that they have something in common with each other. Accordingly, Daddy Yankee, known by many as “The King of Reggaeton,” feels that this genre has “unified the Latin masses. The music makes them feel Latino. It’s in their heart.”⁴² Indeed, this self-reflexive Latino identification was especially evident to me during the sold-out *Invasión del Reggaeton* concerts that brought a variety of Latinos together in a shared physical space. One attendee posted her feelings online after the experience: “We should be UNITED for the Reggaeton movement that is bringing all the Latinos together and that is here to stay.”⁴³ A similar Latino consciousness was observed by *New York Times* journalist Mireya Navarro at the Queen Mary concert in Long Beach, CA where she witnessed “a crowd of more than 6,000 bobbing and grooving while waving flags from an array of Latin American countries.”⁴⁴ Through performance, music, song, and community,

⁴² Sara Corbett, “The King of Reggaeton,” *New York Times*, February 5, 2006, Magazine section <http://www.nytimes.com/2006/02/05/magazine/05reggaeton.html?ei=5088&en=748f9fcd9b6ccfe8&ex=1296795600&adxnnl=1&partner=rssnyt&emc=rss&adxnnlx=1148443304tV1V+nBujJPcd5oGBYDHZA>.

⁴³ Dolorez, comment on “*Invasión del Reggaeton*,” comment posted May 2, 2005, http://www.boricua.com/forum/display_forum_topics.asp?ForumID=4 (accessed May 13, 2005).

⁴⁴ Mireya Navarro, “Mad Hot Reggaeton,” *New York Times*, July 17, 2005, <http://select.nytimes.com/search/restricted/article?res=F30D12FB35590C748DDDAE0894DD404482>.

reggaeton has led a new generation of Latinos in the U.S. to feel pride in their common heritage.

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Abstract

In 2004, reggaeton exploded upon the U.S. popular music market with its danceable rhythms and catchy hooks. It quickly cultivated a significant pan-Latino audience in the United States composed of youth from a variety of Latino backgrounds – Puerto Rican, Mexican, Colombian, Dominican, Venezuelan, and more. But this is not the first time that popular music has fostered a sense of pan-Latino pride in the States. In this article, I trace some of the ways in which reggaeton shares commonalities with salsa's construction of, and engagement with, a pan-Latino U.S. audience in the 1970s. Drawing on an analysis of music, lyrics, and music videos, I argue that both salsa and reggaeton have been specifically designed to reach the widest possible Latino demographic in two significant ways. First, both genres are influenced and composed of a diverse array of musical styles, allowing people from different Latino backgrounds to relate to, and enjoy, the hybrid musical elements. Secondly, both genres feature lyrics that reference issues faced by different Latino communities and explicitly call for the development of pan-Latino unity. This article touches on the relevant ways in which reggaeton has succeeded in fostering a sense of pan-Latino pride by providing a socio-musical community that Latino youth participate in together, highlighting the similarities, rather than the tensions, between different Latino groups in America.