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De Venus a la Amazona: diálogos de género en la poesía puertorriqueña y el reggaetón

Literary and musical manifestations are reflections of the historical, political and social discourses and imaginaries of those who produce them. This is specially truth in the case of Puerto Rico due to its permanent colonial condition. Since the beginning of the XX century, Puerto Ricans have found in music and literature a place where national issues are articulated, negotiated and social and political problems denounced openly. In both spaces, writers and composers express and question social myths, believes and imaginaries, one of them being power and gender relations. Here I explore the way in which reggaeton music and poetry, from the last decade, rely on popular imaginaries, myths and social believes in order to produce their own discourse. My paper explores the construction and rearticulation of virtual feminine bodies in Caribbean contemporary poetry and reggaeton music. In the Spanish Caribbean, and specifically in Puerto Rico, reggaeton lyrics play a very important role in the construction of a collective imaginary as producers of the “normative” images of femininities consumed by popular culture. The circulation of virtual musical bodies works toward a corporeal economy of consumption, emulation or rejection of different local and international gender stereotypes. My work specifically investigates the dialogue and intersections between the highly sexualized lyrics of reggaeton artist Daddy Yankee and the literary work of Puerto Rican poet Mara Pastor. I will explore the possibility of a correspondence between the femininities consumed by the general public of reggaeton music and those of the poetic production. That is, I want to see if there is an effort in Mara Pastor's work to subvert commonly consumed images of femininity, both visually and textually, as opposed to Daddy Yankee's more traditional and patriarchal approach toward women.

In order to “grasp” my subjects and the way they are constructed in literature and music I will part from the dynamic definition of the body given by Brian Massumi in his introduction to Parables for the Virtual where he point out that the bodies, due to movement and materiality, are in constant

passage and process (5). This “real but abstract corporality” is what I refer to as the *virtual body*. Then, the construction of virtual bodies through a specific idea/l of females as being either virginal mothers or problematic and irreverent whores is part of this constant process that functions in direct relation to the social and cultural environment from which they emerge. Conversing with Gloria Anzaldúa's tradition of reading the mestiza body as a geography of social and cultural intersections, but referring specifically to the Caribbean subject, Jossianna Arroyo proposes that: “...the body can be seen as a space where political ideologies, social powers and identitary definitions in Postmodern Latin America intersect” (*my translation* 3). I am reading these virtual textualized bodies as the point of convergence of cultural discourse, social and political imaginaries, and explore the way in which they either offer a space from which to break with the contemporary patriarchal models of femininity, or even when reinforcing the normative female, point to how the virtual female body refuses textual discipline.

The contemporary writer, Mara Pastor, officially debuted (*deibiud*) on the Puerto Rican poetic scene with her book Alabalacera (2006), establishing herself as one of the most important contemporary poetic voices on the Island. The title, Alabalacera is formed by a triptych unit that can be read as a whole to mean “to the shooting” (a la balacera), or it can be divided differently to mean: ala (wing), bala (bullet) and cera (wax). These interwoven meanings are visually complemented by drawings in the text, adding depth and allowing for multiple readings of the poems. To analyze the way in which Mara Pastor constructs the feminine body I will concentrate on one of her poems entitled “Abalorio de Venusa”(Venusa's glass bead). This piece is part of the “Bala” (bullet) section of the book, which point to a violent and aggressive component that will be taken into consideration throughout the analysis, and especially how it dialogues with the reggaeton lyrics.

The poem's first stanza introduces the mythical Venus as the central character of the piece, but to the reader's surprise her description is noticeably different from the picture that populates our imaginaries of the Roman goddess of love, beauty and fertility. As Andrew Dalby relates in her book The Story of Venus, she: “was born from the sea...many images depict her rising from waves. Full-

grown, shapely, desirable, with one hand she wrings her long, wavy hair that is still wet from the waters from her mother's womb. With the other she pretends to conceal the secret places of her body. She stands on a scallop-shell as perfect and beautiful as herself" (9). In this typical description, Venus is portrayed as a beautiful goddess; her curvaceous feminine body takes center stage while still wet with the maternal traces of water. In contrast, Mara Pastor's Venus is covered with mud and dirt after being expelled from paradise, and has changed her name to Venusa. The addition of a final "a", which, in addition to making the word feminine in Spanish, can be read as an act of female empowerment challenging the powerful masculine domain over naming as well as language. With this new linguistic and symbolic (re) birth, this time from the soil, she dislocates herself from all the weight that history has imposed upon her iconic figure. Her rupture works as an attempt to inhabit a new space, where she can create her "own story" while she tries to position herself outside the patriarchal appropriation over her body, reproductive capacities and sexuality when being thought as beautiful, non-threatening, modest and maternal.

Together with her symbolic disassociation with patriarchal tradition her body goes through a series of transformations. Venusa is now heavier and her appearance has changed; leaving behind her light robes she now dresses in bright colors, and wears high heels: "Tejido de lentejuelas,/ pisadas sin tropel/ Las libras se sumaron a sus dotes/ Y luego ya no recordaba cómo/ la máscara, la escopeta, las tacas de charol/ Quizás, porque se hizo espejismo del desierto/ y así se ataviaban las de su tipo" (12-17) (TRANSLATE). The poetic voice reconstructs this new Venus, now Venusa as a warrior, her new attire consists of a mask, a shotgun and patent leather high heel boots. The transformation invokes an antithetical image to the Renaissance goddess—the Classical women warriors: the Amazons. Through her re-birth Venusa seems to have inherited their strength and independence appearing as a contemporary version of these emblematic feminine figures. Dressed in her tall boots and her rifle she is ready to confront the world. The poetic voice explains that Venusa is dressed this way because women like her need to be ready for action at any time: "...cómodas/ para bregar con lo que sea..." (17-

8) (Comfortable/to be able to cope with anything that might happen). Although there is no direct reference to her body, except for it becoming more voluptuous (bigger), there is a drawing that accompanies the poem in which, besides the boots and the rifle, she is completely naked, her arms are not visible but her huge breasts seem to replace them and appear capable of handling the weapon if necessary. In addition, her sexual organs are completely exposed and her vaginal area resembles a small penis. The concept of beauty has been reconfigured along with the dichotomy of her chest being either a maternal territory or a sexualized body part to become a tool of war. In contrast to the Amazon women Venusa doesn't need to cut her right breast to action her weapon, the construction of her body is fit perfectly for action. I read these corporeal "mutations" as signs of defiance and irreverence toward a masculine order where females bodies serve for either sexual pleasure or birth pain.

In Mara Pastor's poem Venusa is not alone; she is in charge of a feminine military group. Respected by the rest of the clan she is considered an "hechicera" (sorcerer or witch); this word can function both as a compliment or as an insult. If translated as "sorcerer", it implies knowledge and expertise, but if read as "witch" it hearkens fear and intimidation, especially from the male perspective. In the poem, in addition to be venerated by her peers, Venusa is acclaimed by men for her carnal expertise: "Contaba los amantes la Venusa [...] El otro, lamido en las esquinas, ya no sabía a nada. El de más allá, chirridos y agujeritos en la mejilla erónea" (21-28) (Venusa had so many lovers that she was able to count them [...] One of them in a corner, had being licked so much, he didn't have any taste left on him. Another one squeaked and with had a hole in the wrong cheek, my translation) Her male followers don't seem to mind that once the sexual act is over they are discarded, and left aside like wounded animals.

As we can see, Mara Pastor intends to create a new kind of mythological female figure, one that tries to disassociate herself from the weight of a history of empty idolatry to become an empowered woman of action and sexual power. When including her naked body, her military attire and her hanging breast transformed into arms to the poetic images, we discover a new text that succeeds in

rearticulating a different model of femininity. In addition, it is essential to remember that the poem is part of the “bullet” section of the collection; her body can be read as the bullet itself, as a weapon, and the materialization of violence toward men. Those who fall under the spell of her carnal calling are destroyed; she once again reinvents herself from a wise sorcerer into a femme fatale. This ability to use body and sexuality as powerful weapons opens a space where the feminine subject becomes empowered by the same elements that used to maintain her constrained to patriarchal rules. Mara Pastor’s text, both poem and illustration, assemble a different collection of images from where to construct a different popular feminine imaginary.

Alongside Mara Pastor’s literature I explore the constructions and (re)articulation of the female figure in reggaeton music. This specific musical genre emerged from Puerto Rico in the late 1990s, and as Wayne Marshall, Raquel Z. Rivera, and Deborah Pacini Hernández summarize in the introduction to their book, Reggaeton, it is a fusion of “ reggae, hip-hop, and a number of Spanish Caribbean styles and [is] often accompanied by sexually explicit lyrics...” (1). One of its most recognized performers who was able to make a successful crossover to the United States music industry is Daddy Yankee. The Puerto Rican-born performer became the first reggaeton artist to reach platinum status in the United States with his 2005 album “Barrio Fino” (Fine or Fancy Neighborhood). I specifically analyze the song titled “Lo que pasó pasó” (What happened, happened). Like most of the songs in this male dominated genre, “Lo que pasó pasó” (What happened, happened) vocalizes the male perspective of a failed love relationship. The song is a reaction to an act of betrayal performed by a past female lover. Daddy Yankee begins recalling the great time they both had one night, but later he discovers that she has had another lover. The title, “what happened, happened” points to a past action that can’t be changed and the expression in Spanish also adds a desire to leave the event behind, to overcome it and keep moving forward. But this is not the case in Daddy Yankee’s song, since he stops idolizing the female character (he claims he treated her like a goddess) and she rapidly falls in his eyes and the masculine voice repeats over and over again as part of the chorus how she “failed him”: Esa noche

contigo la pasé bien/ Pero yo me enteré que te debes a alguien/ Y tú fallaste pero ya es tarde[...] ...yo que la traté como una diosa/ Me engañó... ” (4-6;15-16). This automatic conversion from goddess to mere mortal, from being worth of admiration to becoming a whore brings us back to Mara Pastor’s poem. Like Daddy Yankee’s lover, Venusa enjoys a goddess status at first but rapidly she falls into what I call the permanent “fallen witch state”. We have seen how in Pastor’s poem, Venusa has chosen to leave behind her mythological state and recreate herself after her expulsion, but in Daddy Yankee’s song the female figure doesn’t have this kind of choice or ability to reinvent herself. Although both females can be labeled as outlaws, Venusa is able to displace herself from the patriarchal symbolic system. But in Daddy Yankee’s case, the past goddess deserves eternal damnation. Thus betraying a man is seen as the ultimate unforgivable crime from the dishonored male perspective.

The masculine voice gives us only one side of the story; the female response is completely absent. This “empty trace” is the way women are generally constructed in reggaeton lyrics. As Félix Jiménez points out when referring to power relations in this musical genre: “Strategically, the built-in female response in reggaeton’s choruses operates against the mythic femme fatale’s freedom of action, thus assuring that the female intervention would not run counter to the songs’ implicit goal of male sexual pleasure” (232). Women are either present as a sensual moan, celebrating the male capacity to fulfill his own sexual desires, or they are invisible counterparts only valuable as they serve to receive the man’s praise or insults. Again, this power relation is inverted with Venusa, where the men are the sexual objects and the female warrior are in control of their bodies.

In this specific song, once the masculine voice has made clear that he won’t take his former lover back he makes a list of all of her qualities and characteristics. Daddy Yankee begins his description by calling her: asesina (assassin), engañadora (trickster--deceptive), abusadora (abusive) and maliciosa (malicious). She is a specialist in the art of love, or fatal love I should say, and her weapon of choice is the bewitching bullets (the same weapon used in Pastor’s poem). The female violence is perceived as a real threat to the masculine lyrical voice in a discourse that constantly

produces, as Alfredo Nieves Moreno comments, "...the superiority of the "barriocentric macho...a male domination, one that enhances the figure of the man and situates him in a position of constant symbolic authority" (255). The specific choice of words used by Daddy Yankee to describe his abuser are the same images found in Mara Pastor's poem, as if the female he is referring to in his song were the poetic character, Venusa. He realizes that he has fallen under her spell; she is the fallen goddess turned witch. The female figure is a goddess as long as she stays in her place as a complement of the male counterpart, but the minute she demonstrates any kind of independent subjectivity she becomes the enemy.

But Daddy Yankee is not going down without a fight, especially when his artistic name refers specifically to the size and corporal force of the stereotypical North American male. His masculine ego has been hurt and as a wounded macho man his revenge is not to please her sexually anymore. He insists in the chorus of the song, which is repeated two times; the same number of repetitions as the accusation of infidelity; that she still wants him back but he is not going to fall under her spell again. She doesn't deserve him or more important, his sexual expertise. With this reiteration he is trying to regain the power in the relationship, but what the male character can't comprehend is that casual sexual encounters don't translate into a "relation-ship" or female possession. His double standards don't allow him to come into terms with the fact that he was tricked and used casually by her. The female virtual body has been used once more, like in Mara Pastor's text, as a disruptive weapon towards the patriarchal and sexist regime articulated in Daddy Yanke's lyrics.

As we have seen, both texts recur to normative social imaginaries to construct their feminine characters. Being contemporary discourses they share similar imaginary referents. The musical lyrics and the poetic universe created by Mara Pastor intersect in the way they play with popular knowledge. The normative figure of the female is used in both instances but with different intentions and results. While Daddy Yankee's lyrics point toward a macho-centric universe where the male is in control, the need to reiterate his hypermasculinity betrays his claim of being in complete control over his ex-lover

or women in general. But this doesn't do much for the representation of women and the way they are silenced and confined through the masculine gaze. The great difference between Mara Pastor's fallen Venusa and Daddy Yankee's ex-lover is the impossibility of the latter to transform from monster or witch into a sorcerer, that is, producer of her own voice and knowledge. Although both discourses seem to be trapped to a certain extent within a patriarchal dichotomy of goddess and monster, Mara Pastor's character is able to rearticulate Venusa as a teacher and example to other females; her naked body becomes the bullet, the weapon that disrupts Daddy Yankee's utopic machocentric universe.

It is important to clarify that for this specific analysis I didn't deal with the mark of race in the different female bodies that I discussed. In my further investigations this is going to be taken into consideration because even though there is no direct reference to race in this specific song, the reggaeton music has a long history of racial identification and discrimination from the government and middle and high class Puerto Ricans. Also, I'll have to define whenever the poetic creation of Venusa should be read as a colonial body or a transnational feminine icon.